

**STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF  
HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE –  
A SINGAPORE CASE STUDY**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND  
POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Social Studies Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

February 2014

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## **Abstract**

Although the disciplinary approach to teaching history has been around since the 1980s, it is still relatively new in Singapore. Attempts to incorporate parts of it in the history syllabuses implemented in 2000 and 2007 were met with limited success. Yet, the desire to move away from didactic methods to more disciplinary and inquiry-based methods remained strong. This study argues that the disciplinary approach to teaching history is integral for helping students manage the complexities of contemporary life. It focuses on one of the concepts within in this approach – significance. I argue that by investigating the sort of ideas students harbor regarding significance, history educators in Singapore would be better positioned to design curriculum and pedagogical experiences that can overcome the obstacles encountered in teaching history.

I achieve these objectives by embarking on a small-scale quantitative study with 50 students from 3 schools that reflect students from different ends of the ability spectrum. Data were gathered through student participation in a survey questionnaire and a small group interview that were designed to answer the following research questions: “What criteria do students use when they ascribe significance to phenomena in history?” “Do they see significance as fixed or variable?” Student responses were analyzed using Lis Cercadillo’s (2000) typology for significance as a coding paradigm within a grounded theory approach.

The findings suggest that most participants did not have problems employing different criteria to ascribe significance to events in the past; and that the majority of the students seemed to see significance as variable. However, students tended to justify their responses in a cursory manner, displaying their shallow understanding of significance. While this may not be surprising, the value of this study lies in its attempt to make explicit the extent of complexity in students' ideas of significance in order to help history educators improve the way students are taught. In drawing connections between the findings and the issues it raises, I argue that the socio-political context plays a primary role in influencing students' capacity to think historically; and I proceed to discuss the implications for history educators in Singapore.

## **Preface**

The research carried out for this thesis was reviewed by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The behavioural study, numbered H13-01016 and titled "Students' Understanding of Historical Significance – A Singapore Case Study", was approved on August 7, 2013, with Prof. Penney Clark as the Principal Investigator.

The design of this research study was conceptualized by myself, under the guidance of Professor Penney Clark and Professor Peter Seixas. I was responsible for the collection and analysis of data in all the three schools involved in this study.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the keen and thorough guidance of my supervisory committee, especially in the months where I was away from Vancouver to conduct research in Singapore. Special thanks to Prof. Penney Clark who readily extended every support she could from my first day at UBC. I am grateful for the time and expertise she has offered to improve the quality of this thesis. Many thanks to Prof. Peter Seixas whose teachings have always pushed me to develop my ideas on what it means to think historically. Sincere thanks to Prof. Mona Gleason whose comments have steered me to think and become more cognizant about the social-cultural contexts from which I write.

I am grateful for the support given to me from the Ministry of Education Singapore, as well as to the school leaders, teachers and students from the three schools that I worked with. Thank you for facilitating my research study.

## **Dedication**

To my beloved husband,

Eddie

*Thank you for your unwavering support and sacrificial love, which helped to turn my dreams of pursuing a Masters degree into reality.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a school subject in Singapore, history has often been perceived by students to be didactic and teacher-centered – a ‘boring’ subject packed with facts about events, dates and people to be mastered, memorized and regurgitated by students in examinations (Afandi & Baildon, 2010). Such perceptions are more often than not confirmed with their experience of studying it in school, where they spend much time learning about the past but little time understanding how the past is constructed. This inadequate but unfortunately dominant approach of teaching history in schools shortchanges students by denying them the opportunity of experiencing history as a discipline with distinct methods and procedures, one that enables them to actively construct valid interpretations of the past or evaluate competing versions (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Kitson & Husbands, 2011). It is thus no surprise that students find it difficult to see the relevance of history in their lives, perpetuating the idea that history is a dull, boring and static subject of little practical use.

#### **1.1 School history as authoritative and unproblematic**

The problem with school history as outlined above is not unique to Singapore. Keith Barton (2009, p. 266) acknowledges that school history in the United States is faced with “the worst excesses of transmission oriented instruction”, making it an unpopular subject for students. Bruce VanSledright (2011) also agrees that transmission-oriented instruction methods are most

common in US classrooms (p. 21). Lis Cercadillo (2001, p. 122) too, indicates that in Spain, “didactic methods are preferred to enquiry”. Anna Clark (2008, p. 114) echoes similar findings for history classrooms in Australia and Canada. Regardless of country or school system, this approach to school history can be attributed to the belief that learning history is as ‘simple’ as learning about what happened in the past. Such practices are a long way from teaching students about the interpretive nature of the discipline of history.

Ironically, the notion that there is only one objective and authoritative version of the past in history has long been called into question in academia. Carl Becker (1932) raised this in “Everyman His Own Historian” where he asserted that histories, whether written by historians or non-historians, are “subject to the limitations of time and place” (p. 230), and are thus conditioned by experiences, intentions and biases. According to Becker, even the seemingly neutral act of selecting and affirming a ‘historical fact’ from amongst others will result in emplacing them in a certain pattern of ideas, thereby ascribing the author’s meaning to it. It is therefore not the historical facts that speak, but the perceiving mind of individual historians (pp. 233-234). Confidence in attaining singular, authoritative truths about the past has been further shaken by post-modernism’s linguistic turn on the discipline in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, William Cronon (1992), in his attempt to understand how different historians studying the 1930 Dust Storms in the Great Plains could come up with such different yet credible accounts, concluded that it is the rhetoric of story-telling, the different

agendas of narrators and readers, that permeates their interpretations as historians (p. 1372). Another significant development that challenged the confidence in a singular interpretation of history is the advent of new social histories in the 1960s. The rise of women and gender, labour, ethnic and other revisionist histories challenged the dominance of the more traditional political, economic and often, elitist accounts of the past. Simply put, just as it is not possible for historians to separate themselves from the histories they write and claim to be able to represent the past 'as it was', neither is it possible to assume that there can only be one credible account of the past. This inevitably begs the question, "If the discipline has rejected a positivist approach to understanding the past, why are our students still learning history in that way?"

Peter Seixas (2000) calls this approach to teaching history "teaching for collective memory". Although he does not agree with it, he acknowledges the benefits that can be reaped by nation-states that adopt this approach in teaching history; and offers three inter-related reasons as to why this approach to teaching history continues to persist in schools. Firstly, such an approach shapes a group identity that is defined by common experience and belief, demarcating clear boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, which in turn, engenders a sense of identity. This leads to the second reason – the fostering of social cohesion that helps to prevent both the fragmentation of a nation's story as well as its social fabric, which is constantly under threat from differences that exist among people's ethnicity, class, gender, ability, or sexual orientation etc. Finally,

teaching a best version of history can provide a compelling moral framework that influences individuals to act in ways that are deemed appropriate by the nation-state. By teaching a single, best version of the past, a trajectory is offered from which one's decisions and actions in the present can be tied to the economic, social or political development of the nation. Thus, a singular and authoritative version of the past provides a powerful framework that orientates those who subscribe to it (p. 22-23).

The reasons Seixas offers in explanation for the persistence of the parochial approach to teaching history are supported by Arie Wilschut's (2010) comparative study of modern school history in Germany, England and the Netherlands. His study concludes that how history is taught in schools is a function of three factors: politics and society; pedagogical and psychological considerations; and academic history (p. 717). He observed that for the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the will to adhere to the standards of academic history in school was superseded by the demands of politics and society – which are to serve specific moral and patriotic goals. It is thus nearly impossible to prevent political ideology and rhetoric from creeping into school history, especially since school history is declared too important to be left to teachers and educationalists alone (Wilschut, 2012, p. 29). Instead of helping students understand and come to terms with the contingent and capricious nature of history, school history was unabashedly co-opted by the state and used to emphasize shared values. All this is done in the hope of developing a shared continuity of national identity between

past and present (Blaas, 1998 in Wilschut, 2012, p. 30). This state of affairs, Wilschut argues, has allowed school history to continue embracing a positivistic approach where the unproblematic, single and 'best' version prevails; despite the fact that academic history has already long rejected this approach.

Yet, despite the supposed benefits of identity formation, social cohesion and the provision of a morally compelling narrative, allowing students to believe that there is only one authoritative version of the past is becoming glaringly inadequate in an increasingly globalized world where ideas, information and migration take place at a rapid pace. Teaching history as collective memory becomes less tenable because it ignores the multiplicity of complementary, competing and clashing accounts of the past (Lee, 2004; Seixas, 2006, Lévesque, 2008). The socio-political and cultural contexts in which students learn are also crucial. Most societies around the world have become less homogenous and more multicultural, where a singular, authoritative narrative account of a country's past may neither adequately include nor represent the histories of its different communities.

It is under such circumstances that Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004, p. 17) assert that it is unrealistic to assume that the only time students encounter history is in school. On the contrary, educators need to be attentive to the kinds of history that students are exposed to daily, whether they are in the form of television programs and movies, the internet, museums and historic sites, historical literature or cultural traditions and ideas that are shared among family,



relatives and friends. Because these sources of historical knowledge have the potential to either support or challenge the histories students encounter in schools, it has become imperative to help students understand that the past is not a simplistic matter of knowing 'what exactly happened' or 'which version is true'. Instead, students need to be taught to recognize that the past is a complex and contested terrain with multiple and often competing accounts.

To achieve this, I argue that students need to learn how to differentiate between the past and history. Using the definitions offered by Mike Denos and Roland Case (2006), the past is everything that has happened, but it cannot be recounted in its totality. History on the other hand, involves attempts to interpret what happened in the past, but is by nature limited in that interpretation. In this respect, history is not fixed, because stories told about the past change with different values, ideas and audiences that emerge over time (pp. 6-7). Only through understanding the distinction between the past and history can students begin to contemplate the constructed nature of historical knowledge. These skills will help them identify authoritative, unproblematic versions of the past as they are presented, and become less willing to accept them as 'truths'. They would also not be as uncomfortable or at a loss when confronted with the complexity that comes with acknowledging and discerning the multiple perspectives, representations and interpretations of the past they encounter.

## **1.2 History education in Singapore: unproblematic and authoritative?**

If Wilschut had extended his study on the purpose and function of modern school history to the Singapore context, I am confident that he would also have found that history education in Singapore, like Germany, England and the Netherlands, plays largely to the demands of politics and society. Several academics in history education in Singapore have written about Singapore's parochial and authoritative approach to history. For example, Afandi & Baildon (2010) argue that Singapore's history and history curriculum have been carefully crafted to ensure a usable past for the purposes of collective memory and nation building (p. 223). Goh & Gopinathan (2005) too, argue that school history is used to instill consensus regarding specific symbolic events in Singapore's history that the state fears is quickly fading away in the minds of younger Singaporeans (pp. 212-213). Loh (1998) takes a slightly more extreme stance, arguing that history education has been and is used by the incumbent political party to legitimize its policies and claims to hegemony (p. 4).

Although the Ministry of Education does not respond to any of these claims, they have made it clear that one of the main aims of history education is to imbue "a sense of loyalty, pride and commitment to Singapore" (Ministry of Education, 2005<sup>1</sup>). A critical examination of how this is done has led me to believe that this has inadvertently made history education in Singapore a relatively uncontested site of memory. Our Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong demonstrates this when he

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<sup>1</sup> This excerpt is taken from the Lower Secondary History Syllabus.

refers to Singapore's history as the 'Singapore Story', which he claims is solely based on 'historical facts'.

The Singapore Story is based on *historical facts*. We are not talking about an idealized legendary account or a founding myth, but an accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and *what this history means for us today*. It is an objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (1997), emphasis mine

Here, he presents the Singapore Story as unproblematic, resting on the assumption that a 'fact-based' history must tell the past 'as it was'. It presents Singapore's past as uncontested, since the singular noun 'story' subtly implies that there is only one version to be studied, known and used.

This version features *our* founding as a colony of the British, *our* tumultuous path to independence, *our* struggle against communism and inter-racial riots, *our* circumstances as a tiny country without natural resources, as well as our triumph against all odds through the strong leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP). It upholds the values of multiculturalism, meritocracy and economic pragmatism as enablers that not only helped Singapore survive its first few decades as a fledging nation, but also made it possible for Singapore to become a first-world country in just one generation (Ministry of Education, 2005; Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2007).

No significant difficulties have been recorded in propagating such a singular, unproblematic version of the past. This is probably due to Singapore's highly centralized system of education, where there is a national curriculum for all subjects. Under this system, the government has had the unchallenged

autonomy to teach Singapore's history as 'collective memory', which inevitably places limits on acceptable interpretations of Singapore's past. Loh Kah Seng (1998) asserts that accounts of the past that can be taken to support the party line are accepted and are included in Ministry-published textbooks while others are marginalized and excluded. This sentiment is very much supported by other Singapore history scholars who find such practices questionable because they see them as attempts to subjugate aspects of Singapore's past (see Sai & Huang, 1999; Hong & Huang, 2003; Wee, 2003). Christine Han (2007) also agrees, and her analysis of history education in Singapore concludes that its textbooks, content and pedagogy work in tandem to reflect the ideology of Singapore's political leaders to a high degree, evidenced by the level of responsiveness of the curriculum materials to important political speeches and opinions (p. 389).

As with the case of other modern nation states, the aim to use history education to create a sense of loyalty, pride and commitment to one's country is not harmful in itself. But Baidon & Afandi (2013) warn that the promotion of an official history like the Singapore Story has unintended consequences for history education. Without sufficient exposure to alternative accounts and perspectives, interest in history and historical inquiry as well as more discipline-based approaches to history education are limited or discouraged (p. 198). These authoritative and unproblematic approaches to the past tend to focus on the narrative itself and as PM Lee said, "what it means for us today" without critically

considering *whose* past is represented, *how* it is written, and for what *purpose* it is written. As a result, students are led to believe that history is the past 'as it was lived', and are not given sufficient opportunity to distinguish between the two. Such a positivistic approach to teaching and learning history inevitably compromises students' ability to critically evaluate different interpretations of the past, leading to them to either dogmatically cling on to a prescribed version of the past that they are familiar with, or accept any other version that comes along – both of which are equally undesirable.

Peter Lee (1994) asserts that it is absurd to claim that school children know history if they have no understanding of how historical knowledge is attained. He adds that there is nothing historical in the ability to recall accounts without any understanding of the problems involved in constructing them, or the criteria involved in evaluating them (p. 45). In the same manner, I would argue that an unquestioned subscription to an authoritative, unproblematic account of the past cannot be considered as an understanding of history either. What then counts as history education that is relevant and necessary for living in our diverse and globalized world?

### **1.3 An overview of this research study**

Having identified what I think is the dominant issue that plagues history education today, I proceed in chapter 2 to propose that a disciplinary approach to history education, along with the introduction of second-order historical thinking

concepts<sup>2</sup>, can serve as a viable alternative to the state of history education that is prevalent today. This proposition is born from my review of the literature relating to the disciplinary approach in history education, where I examine the arguments presented both in favor of and in opposition to it. This review has also convinced me that an understanding of one of these concepts, historical significance, is elemental for enabling students to comprehend what history as a discipline is about, how the past is constructed, and what the process of creating history entails. Without an experience with the concept of significance in history, students may not have the opportunity to probe for the reasons why some events are more often discussed or represented in history than others. By acknowledging that the significance of events in the past are ascribed by different authors in varying contexts and received in particular historical moments, students can begin to contemplate the interpretive nature of history. This paves the way for helping them contemplate the extent to which the past is constructed, which in turn increases their acceptance of differing accounts and perspectives.

I argue that this process of learning about significance in history is valuable on two counts – firstly, it prevents students from conflating history with the past. Secondly, when confronted with unfamiliar versions of the past, they are equipped with the wherewithal to respond with enough openness and confidence to acknowledge multiplicity and evaluate the different accounts.

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed explanation of what second-order concepts refer to in history is offered in chapter 2.

Given the centrality of the concept of significance in history, I have decided to focus my research on how students understand this concept in the context of Singapore schools. Since only a scarce amount of research has been done about students' ideas of historical concepts, I am confident that by learning more about the kinds of ideas students harbor about historical significance through research, this study would be able to assist history educators to improve the state of history education in Singapore through the pedagogical, assessment-related, curriculum decisions they make. The research questions I have set out to investigate are:

1. What criteria do Singapore students use in their ascription of historical significance?
2. To what degree do students see significance in history as fixed or variable?

In chapter 3, I make explicit the position I take, the motives I have, and the paradigm I operate in as a researcher. This is done so that I may increase the trustworthiness of my research, as well as the accountability I have to other researchers in this field. I adopt a constructivist approach in my investigation, mainly because it strongly mirrors my understanding of how knowledge is created in the discipline of history. Since one of the aims of this study is to extend the field of research on students' conceptual understandings in history, and because most other research done in this field operates in a constructivist paradigm, the decision to adopt this approach comes naturally. I also detail the

methodology I've adopted through explaining the rationale behind the design of the research instruments, sampling, framework for data coding and analysis. Thereafter, I discuss the aspects of ethics as trustworthiness that have been considered as part of the study, concluding with a section about what I perceive the limitations of the study are.

Chapter 4 focuses on analyzing and making sense of the data that I've collected. I divide the questions in the survey instruments into two main groups, according to the types of questions that would help me answer each research question. Not only are the students' responses sufficiently rich, offering me the opportunity to draw some conclusions to the research questions, they also grant me some insights into the implications of their responses, all of which I detail in the sections in the chapter. In the final chapter, I explore the implications of my findings for history education in Singapore. I acknowledge that in researching students' ideas of history, it is not easy to separate their thinking from the social contexts in which they learn – and explain what this would mean for teachers as well as other educators involved in educational policy and curriculum design. Finally, I conclude by proposing further areas of research that those interested in extending the conversation on either the disciplinary approach in general or historical significance as a second-order concept can pursue.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This literature review is divided into two main sections - in the first section, I argue that a 'disciplinary' approach with its emphasis on teaching second-order concepts, can offer ways to counteract existing problems in history education and teach history in a meaningful and relevant manner. In the second section, I proceed to introduce one of the second-order concepts taught in the 'disciplinary' approach – that of historical significance. As historical significance is the focus of this thesis, I consider its definition, its importance as a second-order concept, as well as the difficulties and dilemmas history educators face when teaching it. I contend that although a fair amount has been written about significance in school history, not much of the literature addresses how the dilemma of teaching significance can be addressed – and even less so in the case of Singapore. Finally, I situate my study within this gap in the literature, articulating its purpose and significance, and also introduce the research questions.

#### **2.1 A 'disciplinary' approach to teaching history**

To help students differentiate between the past and history, we can draw upon contributions made by history education researchers who propose a 'disciplinary' approach to teaching history. Lee (1983) attributes the intellectual roots of the 'disciplinary' approach to the impact of the ideas of Paul Hirst (1965) and Jerome Bruner (1960) on learning theory. According to Lee, Hirst asserts that the development of the mind takes place in terms of the acquisition of 'forms

of knowledge'. This led to a shift from the emphasis of the importance of mere knowledge acquisition to the need to understand ways of knowing in education. Bruner (1960) similarly argues in *The Process of Education* that understanding the principles of a subject takes students to an understanding of how the discipline operates in its approach to knowledge and phenomena. His argument is premised on a central conviction that intellectual activity, whether at the frontier of knowledge or in a third grade classroom, is the same; and that its difference lies not in the kind of intellectual activity but in its degree. Hence, the foundations of any subject may be taught in some form to anyone at any age (pp. 12-14). Bruner added that such an approach makes learning a subject more comprehensible because content acquired through the subject no longer appears as disparate since it is able to reside within its structure. Students would then find knowledge acquired in this manner easier to retain and transferable to new settings (pp. 24-25).

A more contemporary advocate of a disciplinary approach to education would be Howard Gardner (2006), who advocates that the development of the disciplinary mind along with the synthesizing, creating, respectful and ethical minds are essential for preparing students for the future. Like Bruner, he makes a clear distinction between subject matter (content) knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Gardner maintains that content knowledge in and of itself is only a reflection of good memory work, and cannot be an indicator of a person's understanding of the context in which such content knowledge is produced.

Rather, it is the understanding of how knowledge is produced within specific disciplines that produces sophisticated ways of thinking about the world (pp. 27-28). He argues that developing students' disciplinary knowledge is becoming increasingly indispensable since there are fewer and fewer occupations in which one can progress without some form of disciplinary thinking – whether it be scientific, mathematical, historical, professional, commercial or humanistic thinking (pp. 36-37). Together, Hirst's, Bruner's and more recently, Gardner's ideas opened up a platform for debate in history education about what exactly the structures or 'forms of knowledge' are in history (Lee, pp. 19-20).

History educators in the United Kingdom were the first to apply the work of Hirst and Bruner in school history. It began with the School Council's History Project (SCHP) *History 13-16* in 1972, a curriculum development project aimed at revitalizing history teaching in schools in accordance to its structure, by teaching the nature of the subject. By this, the SCHP meant introducing pupils to both the logic and method historians employ in history. This was done through ensuring that first-order or substantive concepts that pertain to the content in history (e.g. revolution, kingship, bourgeoisie) are taught in conjunction with second-order concepts that structure ideas and reflect the 'logic' and 'discipline' of history (e.g. evidence, causation, change, development and accounts) (Shemilt, 1982, p. 4, 7). It is important to note that one is not taught at the expense of the other; but rather that they share a complementary relationship. Denis Shemilt cited the example where the fundamental structural concepts (also

known as second-order concepts) are the objects of understanding while the “stuff and substance of history serve as the medium through which students’ conceptual understanding find expression” (Shemilt, p. 7). The SCHP was favorably evaluated by Shemilt (1980) who recognized it as a worthy ‘revolution’ in history teaching that can “earn history a place alongside Mathematics, Natural Science and English as a worthwhile component in any curriculum concerned with inducting children into rational forms of thought” (p. 86).

The success of *History 13-16* gave rise to several other projects such as *Project CHATA* (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches, 1992-1995) in the United Kingdom led by Peter Lee, Rosalyn Ashby and Alaric Dickinson. It too, set out to study the application of second-order concepts like evidence, accounts, and causation in classrooms; and students’ responses to such changes in the curriculum (Lee, Ashby and Dickinson, 1993). Since then, the ‘disciplinary’ approach to teaching and researching second-order concepts in history has gained currency in history education precisely because it enables students to see beyond mere content, memorization and rote learning in history. Instead, it articulates the nature of the discipline by allowing them to understand how second-order concepts “shape the way we go about doing history” (Lee and Ashby, 2000, p.199). This provides the basis for students to move from a positivistic to a constructivist approach in history that will in turn enable them to distinguish between history and the past – a critical need identified earlier.

### **2.1.1 Critiques of the disciplinary approach to history education**

Despite increasing interest and support for the 'disciplinary' approach since the 1970s, this approach has not been spared from critique. Here, I discuss four main critiques of it that have emerged in history education. The first is that this approach lacks a philosophy from both a history as well as curriculum perspective. Shemilt discusses this accusation in "History 13-16", and has argued that the strength of this approach lies precisely in its humble rationale. The rationale is that history should contribute to students' understanding of their humanity, culture and society; through the development of rational knowledge that helps to makes sense of their experience in the Western culture in which they live. According to him, despite the supposed lack of philosophy, the simplicity of these propositions has actually increased the credibility of this approach in the eyes of educators; and should not be confused with paucity of substance (Shemilt, 1980, p. 4).

While Shemilt's response provides a compelling argument for the rationale of the disciplinary approach, it leaves the issue of the lack of a philosophical basis unaddressed. Some answers can be found in Lee's 1983 "History Teaching and the Philosophy of History". There, he attempts to ground the 'disciplinary' approach in a philosophy of history, but admits that he has met with limited success. Although Lee (1983) acknowledges that questions about the nature of history as a discipline are essentially questions about the philosophy of history, he asserts that it is difficult to identify a single definitive philosophy of history as a

basis to demarcate what the structures of the discipline are and how they should be taught. He demonstrates this by showing how the concept of evidence, if approached from varying epistemological standpoints, would necessarily lead to a difference in how it is interpreted and taught to students (Lee, 1983, pp. 46-48). In the same vein, Seixas (1996) has noted that “theoriz(ing) the discipline-specific structures of historical understanding” (pp. 767-768) was a worthwhile endeavor as it would provide the key to pedagogy. However, he also noted that such theorizing is subject to social, cultural and historical contexts, making the endeavor a complex one.

Yet, neither Lee nor Seixas view the complexities involved in attempting to ground the ‘disciplinary’ approach in a philosophy of history as deterrents to pursuing them. Seixas posits that discourses about the structures of history would at least provide insights into the historical thinking of the present historical moment (p. 768), while Lee challenges history educators to continue debating and defining the nature of history in order to gain greater clarity as to what students should learn (p. 48). Moreover, Seixas is also careful to note that these ‘disciplinary’ elements should not be viewed as fixed or given, for they are like the discipline of history itself – always developing, always problematic and incomplete, contingent on and limited by the historiographical culture of each time. Both remain proponents of the ‘disciplinary’ approach for teaching history and are convinced of its benefits vis-à-vis the content-driven, didactic approach (cf. Seixas, 2000 and Lee, 2005).

The second critique that has been made of the 'disciplinary' approach is that it waters down and deviates from "real" history because it neglects the importance of transmitting historical knowledge to students. In its place, students are made to practice the second-order concepts in a piece-meal fashion that distorts students' ideas about history. Stewart Deuchar (1997) uses the example of source evaluation to illustrate this point. He insists that because the archives in themselves are too overwhelming, and historical sources are unintelligible to students (e.g. from a different era); they have to be selected and translated beforehand for the students, which both defeats its purpose and compromises the authenticity of the task. He argues that since the emphasis of the disciplinary approach is on the teaching of second-order concepts, less emphasis is placed on teaching students the content they would require in order to properly evaluate a source or for that matter, conduct any historical investigation. As a result, the exercise is conducted in accordance to students' subjective opinions, spiraling it into an enormous game of make-believe, which he calls 'bogus history'.

It has become apparent to me that Deuchar's accusations against the 'disciplinary' approach cannot be validated, as they are based on the fallacious assumption that students are only ever given the sort of exercises raised in his example, and are not given the opportunity to deepen their understanding over time with other more complex tasks. This is clearly not the case because one of the tenets of the 'disciplinary' approach is that the understanding of second-order concepts derived from the discipline of history itself is attained through a

developmental process. Shemilt (1983) had clarified much earlier that although it is not the aim of a 'disciplinary' approach to produce miniature von Rankes, children must attempt nothing less than the practice of historians to understand the nature of history. After all, the structures of knowledge in a discipline cannot be expected to develop overnight: learning to use them in more complex forms comes progressively over time (Bruner, p. 13). For example, it is neither realistic nor good practice to have students evaluate a piece of evidence in context before they have learnt to question the provenance of sources (Shemilt, p. 16). In this respect, since the process of doing history is an elaborate task, simplifying it in order to develop incrementally complex understandings about the historical process is hardly 'bogus' history. It is a systematic method by which students can develop the habits and dispositions of a historian while acquiring an understanding about how the discipline works.

A third critique of the 'disciplinary' approach arises from teacher-practitioners who find themselves at a loss when handling the relationship between teaching 'content' and 'skill' in history. Exactly how much emphasis should there be on teaching 'skills' in history? Is teaching 'skills' more important than 'content'? Such questions are not uncommon among teachers, as they attempt to adapt to curricular reforms that encourage the teaching of second-order concepts in history classrooms. Christine Counsel (2000) proposes that assessment adds a layer of complexity to this issue because despite having teachers use progressive pedagogies that mirror the practice of the academic



discipline in the classroom, students are still expected to display large amounts of substantive knowledge when assessed, especially in the case of milestone examinations (p. 54-55). As if this is insufficient confusion for teachers, the twin pressures of a densely packed curriculum and scarce curriculum time exacerbates the situation and add to teachers' feelings of loss as to how they should handle the relationship between, and appropriate weightings for 'content' and 'skill' in the classroom.

Several authors have responded to this, with Seixas (1999) admitting that the dichotomy between teaching 'content' and 'skills' has had tremendous staying power despite the fact that it represents an incomplete metaphor for developing historical knowledge (p. 318). What had originally started out as a way to highlight the difference between teaching 'what happened in history' (content) vis-à-vis 'how historians know what they know' (skills) has morphed into what Counsel (2000) has termed as a 'distracting dichotomy' (p. 54). She posits that the dichotomizing labels of 'content' and 'skill' have outlived their usefulness and have become counterproductive because they tend to neglect the complex interplay between the two that is necessary for the development of historical understanding. Lévesque (2008) cites a misleading but prevalent conception among educators that stems from this debate: that substantive (content) and procedural (skills) both fall on a linear scale of historical reasoning, and that progress in historical thinking moves from the former to the latter. Like Seixas and Counsell, Lévesque (2008) rejects the unproductive dichotomy as well as its

associated misconception. He claims that historical thinking ought to be developed simultaneously within each of the domains of substantive and procedural knowledge, and not one to the other (pp. 30-31). Although this critique is fairly pervasive throughout the history teaching community, it is one that is nonetheless based on misconceptions about the role that content and second-order concepts (also identified here as 'skills' or 'procedural knowledge') play in teaching history.

The last critique I will be addressing here is one that questions the very premise of the 'disciplinary' approach and its relevance and place in teaching history. Earlier on, I identified a disjunction in history education between history as it is commonly taught in schools and history as a discipline. This disjunction may ultimately be distilled down to the tussle among politicians, educators and the public about what the purposes of history education should be. Should children be taught history in a didactic manner, showcasing a singular narrative that serves nationalistic goals of the nation-state, or should students be taught history in a 'disciplinary' manner that encourages them to think critically about how the past is constructed? The answer to this question does not come easily. Alan Sears (2011) argues that this issue is reminiscent of what Ronald Evans (2004) has termed 'the social studies wars', a hundred-year battle between history and a citizenship-focused social studies for dominance in the social education of students (Sears, p. 345). Wilschut (2012) has also emphasized the complexity of this question by demonstrating that nation states do not adopt a

fixed position on this, moving between favoring one purpose or the other, depending on their socio-political circumstances.

Although arguments have been made in favor of the 'disciplinary' approach to history on the basis of developing critical thinking, some critics see this approach as compromising the socio-political aims of education within the contemporary context of the nation-state in a globalized world. I argue that although the 'disciplinary' approach and the purpose of history education might seem like uncomfortable bedfellows, the dichotomy between the two is not as apparent as previously conceived. In fact, a 'disciplinary' approach to history may even be complementary to the socio-political aims of a democratic nation state. Several scholars have argued that the 'disciplinary' approach in history teaches students to differentiate between the past and history, and acknowledge that accounts of the past are constructed within a historical context. This understanding allows them to contemplate the contingent nature of historical knowledge – that the things people value and believe in are changeable across time and circumstances. When students learn to become sufficiently critical of narratives in history (including those with which they have identified) they are less likely to assume that their accounts of the past are correct, representative of everyone else's, or accepted by all. Teaching students to demonstrate such dispositions is crucial for promoting open debates in a democratic setting. (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 262; Davies, 2000, p. 143; Lee and Shemilt, 2007, p. 16; Sears, 2011, p. 351; Wilschut, 2012, p. 12).

A related argument that has been made against the 'disciplinary' approach is that it necessarily leads students down the path of moral relativism where 'anything goes', muddling the clear waters of any dominant narrative to no productive end. If students are led to believe that all accounts of the past are epistemologically equivalent, all history is merely an expression of the interest of particular groups and thus can bear no moral authority or meaning for others. Seixas (2000) rejects this argument, contending that interpretations of the past are ultimately limited by the archive (p. 32). As much as the 'disciplinary' approach encourages students to critically assess how the past is constructed (through the second-order concepts of interpretations, significance, etc.) it also demands that they return to and examine the historical documents from which accounts of history are constructed (through the second-order concept of evidence etc.); in order to arbitrate between competing versions of the past.

Rather than running contrary to the aims of using history to serve nationalistic purposes (e.g. fostering social cohesion and building a common identity), I would argue that not only does the 'disciplinary' approach not compromise its aims; it can even enhance the way in which they are achieved. Rather than unrealistically enforcing a dominant version of the past and expecting unequivocal acceptance, teaching students to historicize accounts of the past and recognize its contingency can foster the necessary dispositions that develop students' capacity to hold certain views as their own; but not holding them so firmly that they cannot be challenged or altered. Levisohn (forthcoming)

refers to this as having an ‘openness’ that is cognizant of one’s own prejudices against other views while still remaining open to the possibility of that prejudice being challenged. This, he claims, is a primary interpretive virtue of a historian. As citizens living in the context of our present-day globalized world, such a virtue is essential and goes a long way in dealing with conflicting belief systems and perspectives. (See Barton, 2006; Barton and Levstik, 2004; and Osborne, 2004).

Having visited all the arguments against and critiques of the disciplinary approach, I remain persuaded that not only does the ‘disciplinary’ approach have a place in history education today, its method serves as a rationale to justify the relevance of history itself in relation to other subjects in an overcrowded curriculum. In the words of Rachel Foster (2011), explicitly teaching students how to employ the tools of the historian through second-order concepts within the discipline begets critical historical thinkers, comfortable with uncertainties, alert to the complex positioning of any historical text and wary of dogmatism. The study of people in the past, in their temporal context enables our students to develop a richer understanding of what it means to be a human, living in society and time (p. 210). As I have iterated thus far, these traits and dispositions are essential for living in contemporary society.

### **2.1.2 The disciplinary approach and history education in Singapore**

Interestingly, in recent years, the curriculum planners at the Ministry of Education have attempted a move toward a ‘disciplinary’ approach to teaching history as demonstrated in the syllabus revisions of 2000 and 2006. Although the

official rationale for doing so has not been published, I assume that this curriculum reform is likely aligned to the country's Desired Outcomes of Education (DOEs) (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2009). According to the Ministry of Education, the DOEs are attributes that educators aspire to instill in every Singaporean child by the completion of their ten to twelve years of formal schooling. It serves as a common purpose for educators, driving policies and programs, and it ultimately acts as a means to determine how well the education system is doing. Out of the four attributes – I presume that two of them have served and continue to serve as an impetus for a 'disciplinary' approach to history education; that is to develop *confident persons* and *concerned citizens* who have strong civic consciousness, and are able to think independently and critically. However, this move toward a 'disciplinary' approach has met with limited success for two reasons that I believe are inter-related.

Firstly, the teaching of second-order concepts in history in Singapore has not been done in a systematic manner. Only some second-order concepts such as evidence, causation and change appear in the syllabus, whereas others like interpretation and historical significance do not. Those that appear also do not seem to be tied to clear learning and assessment outcomes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the reasons for this are multi-faceted. On one level, it could be due to operational constraints on the ground – a general unfamiliarity on how to teach second-order concepts by virtue of their novelty, insufficient available teaching resources, or teachers' desire to only focus on the second-order concepts they

are familiar with. On another level, it could be due to systemic issues regarding the misalignment between pedagogical aspirations and assessment realities. Afandi (2012) acknowledges the impact that this misalignment can have on the efficacy of the teaching of second-order concepts in history, where the progressive move toward a 'disciplinary' approach in pedagogy is not followed by commensurable strides in assessment (e.g. assessment criteria, modes and types). He argues that since excellent performance in summative examinations are of paramount importance to students and teachers in Singapore's highly competitive education system, it is easy for the novelty of the disciplinary approach to eventually wear off. Teachers are constantly tempted to return to the 'didactic' approach that they believe is more expedient for getting them the desired distinctions (p. 75). Hence, both the systemic and operational constraints identified here wield the power to synergistically undo any attempt or desire to teach second-order concepts to students successfully.

The second reason for the limited success of the disciplinary approach is that little is known about how students learn and understand second-order concepts in history in Singapore. With the exception of Afandi's (2012) dissertation on students' and teachers' assumptions of the concept of accounts and Koh's (2012) thesis on students' notions of reliability and the concept of evidence, no other work is available on students' understanding of second-order historical concepts. More can be done in this area, especially since history education research in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada has

demonstrated that students hold tacit ideas about second-order concepts that can either facilitate or hinder historical understanding. Given the amount of tentativeness among teachers regarding the teaching of second-order concepts, any research in this area, especially those studies that investigate students' existing ideas and attitudes in history can help to identify gaps in their understanding. Knowledge gained from such research can serve as a starting point for designing effective learning experiences for students in the history classroom. (Lee, 2005, p. 31. See also Shemilt, 1980; Seixas, 1996).

### **2.1.3 A note regarding second-order concepts**

Having used the term 'second-order concepts' liberally in the preceding sections of this chapter, it is necessary for me to specify what they refer to and how they will be treated in my research. Over the past two decades, several second-order concepts have emerged in history education. These include, but are not limited to, evidence, change, cause and consequence, progress and decline, interpretation, empathy, accounts, significance, similarities and differences, moral judgment, diversity, interpretation, agency and perspective taking (Lomas, 1990; Seixas, 1996; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Seixas, 2006; Kitson & Husbands, 2011; Seixas & Morton, 2012). Depending on their epistemological standpoints, authors advocate different concepts or use different definitions for some of these concepts. Keeping track of the use and definitions of the various concepts by individual authors can prove to be difficult and overwhelming as there is an absence of a coherent and explicit articulation of them for history



education purposes (Lévesque, 2008, p. 32). However, Seixas (1996) has taken on the task of conceptualizing the nature of historical understanding as appropriate for students, drawing on existing scholarship as well as his own research in order to provide some direction for educators.<sup>3</sup> As of 2012, together with Tom Morton, the key second-order concepts they propose as essential for fostering growth in historical knowledge in students are historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives and the ethical dimension (Seixas and Morton, 2012). Although my thesis has chosen to focus specifically on students' understanding of one of the second-order concepts – historical significance – I am aware that this concept like the others, cannot be viewed as fixed or given, but as developing, problematic and incomplete, contingent on and limited by our historical culture. Hence, I would like to acknowledge that the definition I offer below is both resonant with the definition offered by the British National Curriculum from which history education in Singapore continues to draw heavily, and reflective of a particular historical moment.

#### **2.1.4 Significance in history**

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss historical significance as the focus for my research, highlighting its importance in helping students critically distinguish between history and the past, as well as the difficulties and the

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<sup>3</sup> In his 1996 publication, which is regarded as seminal in the history education field, Seixas distilled the nature of historical understanding to consist of six key concepts: significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline and historical agency.

dilemmas history educators face in teaching it. In attempting to define significance in history, I have chosen to draw heavily on scholars in the field of history education for two reasons. Firstly, although historians of all stripes employ the tools of the discipline in the creation of their narratives and accounts of the past, not all choose to engage themselves with explicating the specific methods they have employed in the process. Even fewer participate in discussions and debates about what the methods entail, how they should be defined, and what its limits are. Hence, even though the discipline of history itself dates back to classical times; disciplinary history, with its characteristic forms of inquiry and unique way of engaging the world is a relatively new player, emerging distinctly only in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Wineburg, 2007, p. 7). The task of debating and defining the structure of history has been championed primarily by scholars in history education because doing so is integral for teaching history. They have done the admirable task of atomizing the second-order concepts that form the structure of history in a manner that both accurately reflects the practice of the discipline whilst being palatable to students. Given my position as a history educator and given that the context and purpose of my research is to enhance history education, the choice to draw upon this field as opposed to others such as philosophy is a natural one.

It is in Lomas' (1990) booklet titled "Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding," that the definitions of the various second-order concepts in history (including significance) were first presented to teachers on a large scale.

The booklet helpfully spells out what Lomas conceives as the key understandings behind each of the concepts, discussing the problems that may be encountered when teaching them in school, as well as the ways to overcome them. There, he describes significance as integral to history because the process of selecting and determining what is significant in history is what makes the subject meaningful. He also asserts that since history operates on the basis that some things are more important than other things, it is necessary to work out the criteria for assigning significance (p. 41). Lomas also adds that the process of doing so should be guided by the acknowledgement that the ascription of significance is subjective and changeable across time.

Seixas (1994) too, considers significance “one of the historian’s key tools” because it is impossible for one to study everything. As such, significance is the valuing criterion through which a historian assesses which pieces of the entire corpus of the past can fit together into a meaningful narrative (p. 281). When attempting to distill exactly how significance should be determined, Seixas also revealed that establishing definitive criteria is both contested and problematic because what is considered historically significant changes across time, depending on author and context. Historical significance then, is not only about establishing criteria to judge historical phenomena but also recognizing that it is a quality determined by the historian or historical thinker. Yet, it should not be mistaken as something that is woven out of fiction, for the ascription of significance to a historical phenomenon is limited by the ability of a contemporary

community to draw relationships between the phenomena of significance to other phenomena, and ultimately to themselves (p. 285). Cercadillo (2000) concurs and adds that even though the significance of events can only be properly understood within the context of a historian's narrative, significance is not arbitrarily determined because evidence still places limits on how the narrative is constructed. She argues that since historical practice generally holds a 'moderate objectivist' position, a historian's accounts of significance would need to adhere to rational measures such as accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency (pp. 52-56), and that these are arbitrated by fellow historians.

## **2.2 The importance of significance in teaching history**

Aside from being 'one of the historian's key tools', history education researchers have identified several reasons why significance should not be neglected in the school curriculum. In two empirical research studies with students, Seixas (1994) found that whether formally introduced to the concept or not, students are likely to have their own simplistic 'everyday' conceptions of what significance means. His first study showed that these are based on problematic (e.g. an uncritical faith in the moral progress of history) or presentist (e.g. relating significance only to self or to the present) notions. His second study (1997) showed that students are often unable to transcend the subjectivist (e.g. a conflation of personal interest and significance) or objectivist (e.g. an uncritical acceptance of a prescribed history) categories (p. 27). It is on these grounds that he affirms that it is necessary to teach students explicitly how to deal with

significance in history, in order to address their misunderstandings and pave the way for building more complex bases of knowledge (1994, p. 299). He asserts that without a sound notion of historical significance, students are left to confront history as an alienated body of facts that appear to have little to do with their own lives; thereby losing the potential to orientate themselves in time (1997, p. 29).

Cercadillo (2001) similarly asserts that significance is central to history because discrete events are not understandable without their link to a frame of reference and a sense of authorship behind them. In order to help students understand how significance is employed in the discipline, they need to be taught to differentiate the criteria that are used in the ascription of significance to phenomena and debate the significance of the phenomena themselves. Students also need to understand that the significance attributed to events varies according to the questions posed by each historian, as well as the spatial and temporal contexts of the narratives within which those events are located (pp. 116-120). Also attendant to these concerns, Christine Counsell (2005) advocates emphasizing the notion of authorship in history so that students will be better placed to understand that the ascription of significance in history is a product of particular individuals and contexts in which they lived; and not simply an unproblematic matter of fixed consensus. She argues that students need this opportunity to see how judgments about significance are influenced, and to engage in such judgments themselves (pp. 30-32).

### **2.2.1 Some difficulties in teaching significance**

Despite the affirmative call to teach historical significance as a second-order concept in schools, historical significance has been under-represented in school curricula. In Singapore, for example, the syllabus revisions of 2000 and 2006 toward a 'disciplinary' approach did not include historical significance as a second-order concept, despite the inclusion of other concepts like change, causation and evidence. Levstik (2000) argues that teachers in the United States are unprepared and at times, reluctant to discuss the tentative nature of significance in history (p. 297). In the United Kingdom, Robert Phillips (2002) referred to significance as "the forgotten key element" in their history curriculum and he attributed the lack of attention to this concept to two factors. Firstly, the concept has been mistakenly deemed as less important than other concepts like evidence, causation and interpretation. Secondly, he suggests that because the concept has not been theorized adequately, the practical potential and usefulness of historical significance has not been properly evaluated (p. 14). This may lead to a lack of confidence in teachers about how to approach and teach it, thus leading to the teachers' neglect of the concept in the curriculum. In addition to Phillips' factors, I argue that there are other reasons for the under-representation of historical significance in school history. The first pertains to the inherent difficulties that students may face in understanding the concept as explained in the following paragraphs, and the second is that teachers themselves face a dilemma in teaching significance. This can be traced to a

broader debate about the purpose of school history, and will be explained in section 2.2.3. Both have acted and continue to act as deterrents for teaching the concept in schools.

In spite of its importance, historical significance remains a complex concept that students can sometimes find difficult to grasp. Here, I list three difficulties students may face when approaching the concept. Firstly, students do not usually have the breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding about the past necessary for making substantiated claims about the historical significance of events in the past. Without due consideration of either, the basis of determining the significance of an event or person in the past is severely constrained (Seixas, 1996, p. 769.). Hunt (2000) agrees, arguing that the ascription of significance requires the ability to go beyond the specific to the general, to extract enduring issues from details, as well as to make links across time (p. 47).

Secondly, and a likely result of the first, students are more prone toward decontextualizing the past in their search for meanings for the present. In their search for meaning through history, they may be prone to ignoring the contexts in which historical actors are embedded and inevitably draw unwarranted 'lessons' from the past (Seixas, 1996, p. 769). This can be attributed to the fact that they may not have been sufficiently inducted into the methods of historical thinking and may not yet be able to appreciate the dynamic relationships between second-order concepts in history. This view is espoused by Hunt who argues that

historical significance is like a 'meta-concept' that requires individuals to draw upon their understandings of causation, consequence, change and even interpretation (Counsell, 2005).

Finally, given the subjective, context-dependent nature of significance in history, students who seek a structured set of criteria to guide their ascription of significance in history would not likely find one. According to Lomas (1990), it is possible that different selections of significant facts about the same event or situations exist, and all of them can be equally valid. In addition, there is no one unquestionable set of significance and true facts about a situation and event (p. 41). Lévesque (2008) adds that even within the community of professional historians, the criteria used to evaluate the significance of any person or event remains unclear (p. 45). Thus, students may either be put off by the relativism inherent in the ascription of historical significance, or take it as an opportunity to apply any criteria for the significance of a person or event. Both of these outcomes are equally fruitless and undesirable.

### **2.2.2 How significance has been approached in classrooms**

This is not to suggest that teaching significance in school history is an insurmountable task. History educators advocating for a 'disciplinary' approach to history have shared Bruner's confidence in the possibility of teaching the structures of the discipline to students of any age in some form. To help students' develop this skill, various history educators and practitioners have devised pedagogical scaffolds of criteria sets for determining significance to guide



students' thinking, facilitate discussion and promote debate about the significance of phenomena in history. The variety of criteria sets available for such purposes is testament once again to the relative and context-dependent nature of significance in history. For a list of the criteria types mentioned below, please refer to Appendix A.

Geoffrey Partington's (1980) set of criteria is the seminal work in this area, but has been criticized for being 'too intellectual' (Wilson, 1985 quoted from Hunt, 2000, p. 41) and also unable to capture the significance of moral, social and cultural issues in assessing significance. His and Tim Lomas' (1990) work on historical significance in "Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding" has led to other sets of criteria over time such as Robert Phillips' widely employed 'GREAT' mnemonic which emerged in *Teaching History* in 2002. This mnemonic is deemed as an accessible set of criteria for a wide range of student abilities, providing students with the vocabulary to articulate the significance of World War I. However, it too is not without limitations for two reasons - firstly, significance as used in his mnemonic focuses largely on the consequences of the event, at the expense of other attributions of significance. Secondly, the criteria set was designed specifically in relation to World War I and is not intended for universal application. Ian Dawson (2003) in the Schools History Project series of textbooks also proposes a very accessible set of criteria to work with, but like Phillips', significance within his criteria set is also defined narrowly, and does not go beyond assessing impact and scale.

Noting the constraints of previous criteria sets, Counsell (2005) sought to find a way to help students think about significance in a divergent manner. By devising a set of criteria that assesses the extent to which a person or event is 'remarkable' (at that time or since) or 'revealing' (of other things in the past) – in addition to 'resulting in change' (having consequences for the future), 'resonant' (across time and space), and 'remembered' (within the collective memory of (a) group(s)). – she hoped that her proposed five 'R's criteria set would enlarge, not narrow a students' perception of significance in history. Another criteria set that seeks to broaden students' understanding of the various possible attributions of significance is proposed by Denos and Case (2006). Their criteria set is not tied to particular contexts, and assists students to consider aspects of significance that go beyond impact and scale. What differentiates their model from Counsell's is that the element of time is particularly prominent in Denos and Case's criteria set, as seen in the broad categories they use: 'prominence at the time' (immediate recognition, duration); 'consequences' (magnitude of impact, scope of impact, lasting nature of impact); and finally 'subsequent profile' (remembered, revealing).

The presence of a variety of criteria sets of different levels of sophistication is certainly advantageous for teachers as they cater to a spectrum of student abilities and offer students a way to develop the complexity of their understanding of significance in history. Yet, it should be noted that such criteria sets as presented to students are still rather limiting because they only focus on

a particular aspect of significance – that which pertains to justifying the significance of any phenomenon in history based on reasoned criteria. They are limited in that they do not deal with questions about how the criteria are derived, whether all criteria are equally weighted and whether the criteria can differ among people and over time. Alison Kitson & Chris Husbands (2011) argue that none of them provides sufficient basis for students to consider the relative nature of the concept of significance (p. 86), something Seixas (1994) claims is as important as establishing criteria when dealing with significance in history (p. 285).

It should be noted that Denos and Case (2006) have put forward a heuristic model that emphasizes this tentative aspect of significance, in what they have termed the dimensions of historical significance. They are as follows (p. 10-11):

- Determinations of significance are unavoidable;
- Significance depends on one's perspective;
- Significance depends on purpose;
- Significance varies with time;
- Significance is not simply a matter of personal reaction; and
- Significance depends on context.

These principles have taken into account the contingent nature of significance in history and they have been worded with great clarity. Together with their criteria set for determining significance, I would argue that it is one of the more thorough approaches to discussing significance as a second-order concept in history classrooms. I would also argue that because of its comprehensiveness, this

approach would be most suitable for older or more advanced students. Introducing it in its entirety might not be appropriate for younger learners or students who are new to history. For such students, perhaps Seixas and Morton's (2012) approach may be more suitable because their approach encapsulates both aspects of significance mentioned earlier, without necessarily compromising on the sophistication of the concept itself when presented.

Deliberate in its limitation to just four guideposts<sup>4</sup> – 'resulting in change', 'revealing', 'constructed through narrative' and 'varies over time and among groups', this pedagogical scaffold deals with aspects of criteria that are commonly used to ascribe significance as well as the relative nature of significance with students. The first two guideposts attend to the attributions of significance that deal with causation as well as the connections to other phenomenon in history and contemporary life, allowing students to debate the significance of events according to these criteria. On the other hand, the other two guideposts draw students' attention to the relative nature of significance in history, leading students to the understanding that the significance of any phenomenon is constructed as product of a historian's narrative and as a result, varies over time and from group to group. At present, I would argue that Denos and Case's or Seixas and Morton's approaches are most reflective of the concept of significance in history as understood and dealt with by historians. Even so, I have also asserted that all the other pedagogical scaffolds listed in this

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<sup>4</sup> Guideposts as used by Seixas and Morton pertain to the big ideas about each historical thinking concept that allow students a way into the historian's way of thinking.

section are useful in their own way, depending on how they are used, when, and with whom. With them, schools have been and continue to be well placed to introduce this concept to students. Yet, it seems almost curious that this concept has not been taught explicitly to students, and in the following section, I propose that it is likely due to a dilemma that teachers face.

### **2.2.3 A dilemma in teaching significance in school history**

Aside from the complexities inherent to the concept that make teaching it difficult, another deterrent in teaching historical significance in schools is the dilemma teachers may face in teaching it, one that is reminiscent of the discussion earlier regarding the 'disciplinary' approach to teaching history and the purpose of history education. In the context of modern nation states, Kitson & Husbands (2011) rightly acknowledge that school history is a site of contestation because it is subject to endless external pressures. Politicians especially, seek to undermine what and how the past is taught in order to control how national identity is shaped (p.17). If history education is seen as a vehicle for building social cohesion and shaping group identity, the way school history is taught and how historical significance is ascribed would inevitably become prescriptive – determined by the dominant narrative and fixed by authorities. As a result, history's potential for fostering stimulating debates and investigations about perspectives and meaning in the past erodes away, leaving history as a catechism for students to memorize (Seixas, 2000, p. 20-23).

This presents educators with a dilemma: on one hand, there is a desire to teach an uncontested understanding of the significance of particular events in the past to serve the nation's purposes in the present; and on the other, a call to teach significance as author and context dependent, giving students a chance to engage in the historical discipline's critical modes of inquiry. As I have argued earlier, one need not come at the expense of the other. Instead, an artful negotiation between the two is necessary because there is good reason to both educate for nationalistic purposes as well as for historical understanding. That said, with regard to the concept of significance, exactly how a balance could be struck between the two without compromising either is still relatively unclear. Research in history education thus far has only focused on students' pre-conceived notions of historical significance (Seixas, 1994 and 1997; Cercadillo, 2001, Conway, 2006), how positionality affects students' ideas of historical significance (Levstik, 2000; Lévesque, 2005; Barton & Levstik 2008; Epstein, 2009), and progression in students' ideas of historical significance (Cercadillo, 2001). The field is yet to see a study that addresses how school history can negotiate the dilemma between adhering to the need to ascribe significance in history for purposes of fostering social cohesion in modern nation states, whilst developing students' critical faculties to not unquestioningly accept significance as a fixed property of an event or person. Even though recommendations from such a study cannot claim to be a 'panacea for all' due to differing socio-political contexts among countries, the findings are still valuable in helping teachers gain

knowledge in this area and inform decisions on how they intend to approach the teaching of historical significance in school history.

### **2.3 Situating my research**

It is within this context that I situate my research. In this small-scale research study, I investigate how a group of 14-year old Singapore students approach and understand the concept of historical significance – with particular interest in how they ascribe significance to events in Singapore’s past; and whether they perceive historical significance to be a matter of fixed consensus or variable across contexts. Students from this age group were selected for this study because they have completed the compulsory study of Singapore’s history according to the prescribed national syllabus. Although there is no national assessment for this syllabus, only one state-authored textbook is available as a resource for schools. This ensures that most students’ experience of Singapore’s history would be closely aligned to what has been prescribed. A study of their responses would offer interesting insights to the extent of which they accept, challenge or offer alternatives to what is significant and how significance is ascribed in their textbook.

The importance of revealing students’ tacit understanding of significance should not be understated. According to Seixas (1997), it must not be assumed that students uncritically accept what their teachers or textbooks claim is historically significant. In his work with Canadian high school students, he found that they actively filter, sift, remember, forget, modify and reconstruct their

frameworks of understanding what is significant through their often unarticulated values, ideas and dispositions (p. 22). Living in a globalized era characterized by the rapid migration of people, information and ideas, it is inevitable that students encounter competing claims as to what is historically significant according to 'official' versions presented in school history. Stéphane Lévesque (2005) concurs, adding that if contradictory accounts are not addressed through developing students' understanding of significance in history, it may well lead them to become highly suspicious of historical study. Hence, rather than leave them to their own devices, Seixas advocates an understanding of students' tacit understandings of significance in order to develop pedagogical tasks to help them orientate themselves in their understandings about the past and its meaning to them.

This research is based on the tradition of history education that draws on cognitive learning theory and history education research to define and understand how school history should be taught. Like its counterparts, it is guided by a constructivist paradigm that regards students' learning as a process of transforming understandings that they already have. Since students are not 'blank slates', understanding their prior conceptions of any topic or issue is seen as key to building and developing conceptual complexity. As such, my proposed research questions are as follows:

1. What criteria do Singapore students use in their ascription of historical significance?



2. To what degree do students see significance in history as fixed or variable?

In the following chapter, I detail the research methodology that will be employed to answer these questions.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

#### **3.1 Research paradigm**

As a first time researcher, I have come to realize how imperative it is to make explicit the motivations and method of any research study. In recent decades, the field of social science research has come to acknowledge that no research is value-free, regardless of the paradigm by which it is guided (e.g. positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, feminist, queer, Marxist or cultural studies, etc). Denzin & Lincoln (2011) assert that all research is interpretive and is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world, and how it should be understood and studied. Depending on the interpretive paradigm adopted, particular demands are placed on the researcher, ranging from the questions that are asked, to the interpretations that are made as a result of the data gathered (p. 13). In this chapter, I aim to elucidate all aspects of my research process – from the chosen paradigm to my intentions and role as a researcher; and from the research procedures to the data coding and analysis. By explicitly stating the intentions behind the many choices that I have had to make in the course of this research, I hope to increase the trustworthiness of my research, as well as to increase my accountability to other researchers in history education.

##### **3.1.1 A constructivist approach**

Since Guba & Lincoln (1994) have declared that “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm” (p. 105), I will discuss the paradigmatic

influences on my research first in this chapter. Among the many paradigms that pervade social science research today, the one that I identify most with is the constructivist approach. At its heart, it adopts a subjectivist approach to epistemology, which assumes that the inquirer and the inquired cannot be separated. This means that all research is influenced by lived experiences and will always be apparent in the knowledge that is subsequently generated (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, pp. 103-104). The decision to affiliate my research with this paradigm is a natural one for three reasons. Firstly, it strongly mirrors my understanding of how knowledge is created in history and how history as a discipline works – that accounts of the past are never independent of the historian who writes them; something I have discussed extensively in the previous chapter. Secondly, I am cognizant of what I, as a researcher, bring to bear on my research. I acknowledge that the very reason I have chosen to embark on this study is a reflection of my experience and position as a history educator in Singapore; and the manner in which I choose to conduct the study is also telling of what I hope to achieve as a result of my research. I elaborate more on this in the following section. The third reason for affiliating my research with the constructivist paradigm is because the research studies that this study draws upon and hopes to extend, also adopt a constructivist approach (see Cercadillo, 2000 and Peck, 2009). Cercadillo's and Peck's studies are guided by grounded theory and phenomenology respectively, both of which are associated with a constructivist paradigm. Pursuing my research in this paradigm allows me to

remain true to the dialectical characteristic of constructivist research that other researchers have begun because it draws upon consensual language and actively engages with preceding research in order to further a discussion that has already begun.

### **3.1.2 Position and role of the researcher**

Aside from being resonant with my understanding of the nature of knowledge, the position that constructivism takes on other research-related issues<sup>5</sup> is very much aligned to mine. Although it is not possible to discuss all of them in detail here, I have identified four other issues that I believe are most relevant. These are the issues of axiology and action, which will be discussed below; and the issues of ethics and validity, which will be discussed in section 3.4.

Across all types of research, it is now assumed that it is the researcher's responsibility to be unambiguous about their intention, role and position in their research. Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) deal with these matters under the issues of axiology (how researchers act on the research they produce) and action (what is produced as a result of the inquiry process beyond the data and how it is used). The need to address these issues stems from the understanding that all researchers and research studies have roots in different traditions and are

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<sup>5</sup> The issues identified here are part of Lincoln, Lynham and Guba's (2011) heuristic schema of inquiry, thought and practice (p 101-115). This schema acts as a tool that broadly identifies a series of basic beliefs, practical issues, critical issues that concern research today and explain how the different paradigms (positivism, postpositivism, critical, constructivism and participatory) adopt different positions for each issue.

thus socially situated. This means that even as researchers seek transparency, not all may do so for the same purpose. For example, positivist researchers reveal their intentions in order to prove their neutrality and impartiality. They perceive any deliberate intentions or actions that follow a research study as a form of advocacy or subjectivity that threatens to contaminate the research results and processes. On the other hand, adherents to the constructivist or critical paradigm make explicit the intentions for their research for a completely different reason – in order that it may increase the awareness of the function and outcome of a research study to all involved, especially the participants. Hence, while positivists think of having an intention as suspect, constructivists and critical theorists view it as central to the research study.

I would argue that the positivist stance of neutrality is an unrealistic one, since post-modern sensibilities have demonstrated that no research can be value-free. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) have argued, the social sciences are normative disciplines that should be committed to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace and universal human rights (p. 11). It is no longer acceptable for social science research to be selective about whether or not it can address these issues. Since research participants are no longer viewed as mere subjects but co-creators of knowledge, researchers are morally obligated to ensure that findings from any research study should be shared with and used to empower the communities from which they were generated.

My study is no exception. As a history educator of six years in Singapore, it is my intention to understand the level of sophistication of students' perceptions and ideas of significance in history, not only for the purpose of contemplating how the concept can be better developed in our students, but so that they will learn to question parochial narratives in history when they are dictated to them. Findings from this study can also shed light on and allow me to make observations about the state of history education. In the previous chapter, I have pointed out that one of the main issues confronting history education in Singapore is the perception that teaching for historical understanding comes at the expense of citizenship aims. I argued that this misperception has led to history being taught in a didactic manner where parochial narratives dominate. Should the results of this study suggest that the complexity of students' understanding of significance in history is related to the way history is presently taught. I hope to use my findings to encourage reflection among history educators, that they may consider its applicability to teachers and students, and its impact on classroom practice and the need for changes to the curriculum. The students that have participated in this study are not to be left out either. I intend to follow up with them after the research study, sharing the findings with them in a manner to which they can relate.

In summary, my approach toward issues of axiology and action leans more toward a constructivist one. It does not identify with a positivist stance, but has more commonalities with a critical paradigm instead. Yet, it is more moderate

than a critical approach as it does not share the resolve of critical theorists for immediacy and totality in social change; adopting a more cautious outlook instead. Changes in education, especially where the stakes are high (both for students and educators alike), cannot be achieved overnight. Instead of demanding change right away, the findings of my research will be a contribution to the existing body of knowledge on history education. It will augment, challenge, and illuminate existing issues as well as raise new ones where necessary, so that a more complete picture of the state of history education may be presented.

### **3.2 Research procedures**

In this section, I attempt to systematically delineate the steps that I have taken for the research study, and provide clear rationales for the methods I have employed.

#### **3.2.1 Research site**

Several considerations need to be highlighted to provide an understanding of the context for this research, in order to demonstrate how they have influenced its design and outcome. The first consideration deals with understanding students' cognition in history education; where there are inherent difficulties eliciting students' conceptions of historical concepts, as they are often tacit (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1993, pp. 3-4). According to Guba (1981), this refers to knowledge that may be difficult to explicate but is somehow 'known'; based on the assumption that everyone 'knows' more than they can communicate, even to

themselves (p. 78). Given that demonstrating how much they understand about history is very much dependent on linguistic manipulation, students may not be able to articulate their thoughts in clear and straight-forward ways for the researcher to interpret. Additionally, when students are confronted with complex questions for the first time and cannot fit them into any other familiar experience, their responses are made as they occur to them. Lee, Ashby and Dickinson have cautioned that this makes it difficult for researchers to discern if responses made by students are deeply significant or are merely devices to maintain the confidence of the interviewer (p. 3-4). This difficulty is also increased because second-order historical thinking concepts like significance are not taught explicitly to Singapore students; posing further challenges in creating precise research instruments that can help shed light on students' understandings. Exactly how these considerations have influenced the design of the research instruments and the way the collected data is handled is discussed in section 3.2.3.

The second consideration relates to the limitations the school year places on the research, especially since this study aims to work with secondary two students (14-year olds) who have completed learning about Singapore's history. Schools generally complete the teaching of the Singapore history syllabus by August; and there is only a relatively short period for research (two months) because all Singapore schools close in late October. This period is also known to be the most hectic – schools have to juggle the preparation of students for the final examinations in early October, the processing of end-of-year results and



other related activities as they prepare for the end of the school year. This situation places limits on the scale of the study, as well as impacts the students' rate of participation, both of which I will elaborate in the following section.

### **3.2.2 Sampling**

The sample size for this study was a total of 50 secondary 2 students (14 year-olds) from three schools that represent different levels in the achievement spectrum (high, mid and lower) in Singapore. Since the Ministry of Education in Singapore has recently ceased publicizing secondary school rankings, my selection process involved generating three grouping units using Secondary School Admission Scores (see Appendix B). Schools that fall within the top 33% belong to the first grouping unit, representing higher ability students. Schools that fall within the second 33% belong to the second grouping unit, representing middle ability students. Finally, the remaining 33% of schools belong to the third grouping unit, representing lower ability students.

I began by seeking approval concurrently from the Ministry of Education Singapore as well as the Behavioral Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia. Once the necessary approvals were obtained, I started to contact schools from each grouping unit, inviting them to participate in the research study through their principals. Although it would be preferable for the selection of schools to be random, the majority of the schools I contacted and worked with are those with whom I have had professional contact in my capacity as an educator (e.g. members of the staff were former colleagues). This was

done as a means to facilitate my entrance into the schools, which may otherwise have been difficult or impossible.

It was also not possible to select participating students from each school in a randomized fashion, due to teacher and student availability (after-school meetings, curricular, extra-curricular or co-curricular activities). In order to minimize any disruption or inconvenience caused to teachers and students, I left it to each school to identify potential student participants as well as to suggest the best time to conduct the research based on their knowledge of the school time-table as well as teachers' and students' schedules.

Anticipating not more than a 25% attrition rate among the potential student participants, I arranged to meet with at least 40 students (where possible) from each school. I assumed that by taking this precaution, I would have about 30 participants from each school; sufficient for the sample size I needed for the study. However, upon learning that the study was not compulsory, many students declined to participate, especially since the examinations were either drawing near or the school year was winding to a close. Among those who did choose to take part in the study, a handful had either forgotten to sign or bring their consent forms on the day of the research study, or simply failed to turn up, further reducing the number of participants. The final number of students who took part in the study stands at 50.

Although it is regrettable that the sample size turned out to be smaller than anticipated, it does not compromise the validity of this study as the findings are

not intended to be representative or generalizable. Rather, they are meant to identify a range of responses along an achievement spectrum of secondary 2 students in Singapore, and contribute to a currently under-studied area of history education whilst identifying areas of further study.

The decision to work with secondary 2 students (14 year-olds) is an intentional one, because history as a subject is introduced to secondary 1 students (13 year-olds) and ceases to be a compulsory subject for all after secondary 2. When students progress to secondary 3, most of them take only one humanities subject, and they make a choice from geography, history and literature; of which geography is the subject with the highest take-up rate among students. Since most Singaporean students would have limited exposure to history after secondary 2, it would be interesting to see the extent of complexity in the responses that emerge from students after two years of learning history in schools.

### **3.2.3 Research instruments**

The study involved administering a survey questionnaire to all participants and conducting semi-structured small-group interviews for about 10 selected participants (3-4 from each school). The survey questionnaire (see Appendix C) and small-group interview (see Appendix D) consisted of both open and closed questions; and were designed to discourage students from giving what they thought were 'correct' answers. Students were also reminded verbally before the start of both the survey questionnaire and the small-group interview that were are

no right or wrong answers, and that they were free to respond and give explanations for their answers in the manner that best made sense to them. The open-ended spirit of both the survey questionnaire and small-group interview elicited responses that allowed me more room to delve into students' thinking about history.

Even though the survey questionnaire yielded a substantial amount of data and allowed me to reach a larger number of students, the small-group interviews were also necessary. They complemented the survey questionnaire because they granted me the flexibility to clarify and further probe student responses when necessary. I opted to conduct the interviews in a small group setting instead of a one-on-one setting, as students may not feel as comfortable or ready to speak up when interviewed alone. Although group interviews have been known to allow quieter interviewees to fade into the background, giving each student opportunities to speak can mitigate this. When facilitated properly, data collected from group interviews can be robust as they leverage on group dynamics and allow students to express consensual views as well as challenge each other's viewpoints (Denscombe, 2010, p. 176-177).

It should be noted that although the objective of the study is to understand students' ideas about the concept of significance in history, solely asking them direct questions about the nature of the concept is not viable because it may appear too unfamiliar and overly philosophical to them. Rather than be at risk of obtaining cryptic responses that are hard to decipher, the decision was made to

set the questions about significance within a historical context. The historical context selected for this purpose needed to be one that the participants have a reasonable amount of knowledge about, because their ability to make claims about and substantiate what is significant in history is positively related to the amount of historical content knowledge they have about the phenomenon in question (see section 2.2.1). Thus, Singapore history was selected as the historical context because students would have developed knowledge of it through the primary social studies curriculum and would also have spent the secondary 2 school year learning it in-depth as part of the national history curriculum (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005).

As for the research instruments, the survey questionnaire consisted of five main questions and their corresponding sub-parts, which took students no longer than 45 minutes to complete. Out of the five questions, three were designed to have students articulate which events in Singapore's history they think are most or least significant, and have them explain their choices (Qns 1-3). To prevent the task from being too onerous, a list of 15 events were provided in an accompanying booklet to help students make their choices (see Appendix E). All the events featured in the list were familiar to the participants as they are featured in the national textbook that all students use. Even so, each event was described in brief and was accompanied by a visual stimulus, reducing the likelihood of participants selecting an event based solely on their familiarity with it. Of the two remaining questions, Qn 4 gave the participants an opportunity to

articulate their ideas of significance beyond specific events, and Qn 5 endeavored to reveal how the participants account for differences in the attributions of significance to a given event. As the researcher, I was present throughout the administration of the survey questionnaire to clarify any questions students had as they completed it.

The small-group interviews involved approximately 10 students (three from each school) selected at random from the larger group, and took about 45 minutes. During that time, participants were asked to revisit their choices regarding events that they thought were most or least significant in Singapore's history within the group. By leveraging on the similarities and differences in their choices, all four questions in the interview generated a robust discussion that probed the participants' use of the various criteria to ascribe significance to events; and why they thought they varied from person to person. I conducted all three interviews personally, and duly recorded and transcribed each interview.

### **3.2.4 Pilot study**

To ensure that the research instruments were sufficiently precise for gathering the necessary data to answer the research questions, a pilot study was conducted with a group of nine secondary 2 students. The purpose of the pilot study was to better prepare for the main study by improving the clarity of the questions and reducing any ambiguity or technical difficulties in both the survey questionnaire and survey interview. Nine students completed the survey questionnaire and three of the same group of students participated in the small-

group interview. The pilot study was subject to the same ethical considerations and procedures that governed the main study, where voluntary consent was obtained from both the participant and their parents/legal guardians.

The experience of conducting the pilot study was crucial for a first-time researcher like me. Despite having some teaching experience, I knew that it was not prudent to assume that students would understand the questions I posed to them. Sure enough, the responses gathered from students revealed that further improvements could be made. The first improvement I made was to ensure that any instructions I gave were clear and visible. For example, although students knew that Booklet A's purpose was just to assist them in answering questions 1-3, many of them operated on the assumption that they could only use the events within it. It did not occur to them to use other events that were part of their contextual knowledge. In order to eliminate any confusion, I modified the instructions to state clearly that students were not limited to the events and information in Booklet A.

The second improvement made was to tweak the questions in order to encourage more thoughtful answers and reduce the possibility of vague or irrelevant responses. I analyzed the answers students offered in the pilot study in relation to my research questions and attempted to see if the data could answer my research questions. For questions where the majority of the responses remained vague, I chose to either rephrase the question in a more precise manner, or add another sub-question to probe deeper. For example, the students

had only the option of 'Yes' or 'No', followed by an 'Explain why' for Question 2b of the survey questionnaire. This tended to force students to take a stand prematurely, and it served to straitjacket rather than to diversify their thinking. To encourage a higher level of complexity in their responses, I decided to add a third option, 'Depends', which I hoped would prompt them to think more deeply about the question.

Another example would be Qn 5 of the survey questionnaire, where I noticed that students seemed particularly vexed at having to summarize both Accounts in questions 5a and 5b. Although the rationale for having them do so is a reasonable one (it allows the researcher to see if the students understand the source at all before proceeding to answer more complex questions about it), the students were not aware of this and found the task tedious. Since all of the students in the pilot study demonstrated that they understood the sources and were able to summarize them, I decided to replace the question with one that was slightly more challenging, so that their level of enthusiasm for answering the remaining questions would not wane due to what they may have perceived to be banal questions. Not only did the new question achieve the intent of the original question, it also placed students in a better position to answer the final question.

Although I paid careful attention to how enhancements could be made to both the survey questionnaire and the interview protocol, the majority of the changes were made in the survey questionnaire. Tweaking this instrument was



crucial because it was the mode that systematically elicited data from the participants with little or no interference from me. The interviews, on the other hand, were semi-structured in nature, which allowed me to maintain flexibility as to how the questions were posed to students, even until the moment they were being asked. All in all, the pilot made an invaluable contribution to my research experience because it inducted me into the experience, process and demands of what the main research study would be like, and also allowed me to make helpful modifications to my research instruments in preparation for it.

### **3.3 Data coding and analysis**

The research question of how students ascribe significance to phenomena in history is certainly not a new one. Although several frameworks for historical significance are available<sup>6</sup>, I chose to use Cercadillo's (2000) typology of significance as a basis to code and analyze the data (see section 3.3.1). I adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach (see Charmaz, 2000) that aimed to use Cercadillo's typology as a theoretical framework to analyze the data and see if it is relevant in the Singapore context. Although using grounded theory suggests that I will be proposing my own theoretical framework based on patterns emerging from the data, I will not be doing so, since Cercadillo has already done substantial work in building a typology. Instead, I do what Glaser and Strauss (1967) have emphasized is essential to grounded theory – which is

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<sup>6</sup> These frameworks are highlighted in the previous section. See Appendix A for a summary.

to validate models through seeking confirmation (quoted in Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 782).

Although older approaches to grounded theory insist that data should be analyzed inductively without interference from any theoretical knowledge, developments in recent decades have shown that this approach is burdened with methodological problems and is epistemologically naïve (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 50 and Kelle, p. 197). This is because early grounded theory methods have a positivist orientation toward data which is guided by the belief that the researcher is able to extricate her- or himself and remain completely objective and neutral throughout the research process. It adopts an uncritical stance toward data, which emanates from the assumption that data reside in an external reality and can be accessed and examined in a straightforward manner. This is exemplified when Glaser (1978, 1992, 2002) insists that researchers are to let data emerge, and must not preconceive them either through applying extant concepts (quoted from Bryman & Charmaz, 2007, p. 44). In the words of Udo Kelle, 'the construction of theoretical categories, whether empirically grounded or not, cannot start *ab ovo*, but have to draw on existing stocks of knowledge' (Kelle, 2007, p. 197).

I bring up the shortcomings of the early grounded theory approach not to discredit it, but to show that relying on the narrow interpretation of grounded theory research is simply not feasible as it would likely yield a plethora of incoherent observations and descriptions rather than empirically grounded

categories or hypothesis (Kelle, p. 203). Researchers have acknowledged that there is room for using theoretical frameworks to analyze data, without compromising the integrity of grounded theory research. The solution comes in Anselm Strauss' concept of a 'coding paradigm' where the development of categories in grounded theory research requires the guidance of a previously defined theoretical framework. According to Strauss, using theoretical frameworks is central to data analysis and coding procedures, because it functions as a reminder to code data for relevance to whatever phenomena are referenced by the framework (Strauss, 1987, p. 27) This instructive approach to grounded theory is especially suitable for novice researchers like myself, who are at risk of being inundated by data.

However, some cautionary notes should be made with regard to using Strauss' coding paradigm. Firstly, the temptation to force data into preconceived categories is ever-present, whether through the imposition of deliberately crafted questions, or through the process of classification itself. Although categories can work as enablers that prevent the researcher from being trapped in the particular or becoming immobilized by the large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2000, p. 521); it can also act as blinders that neglect subtle nuances in data which ignore the possibilities for revising existing categories or creating new ones. To minimize this, special attention would be paid not to treat data as a means to seek confirmation for the theoretical framework used; and care will be taken not to simply 'sort the data' in a mechanical fashion. Instead, as a researcher, I will

consciously maintain a disposition that is open to questioning the existing categories of Cercadillo's framework, reflectively asking myself if the framework at hand excludes interesting phenomena presented in the data collected from Singapore students. This is so that changes can be made and alternatives proposed when necessary.

Secondly, a preoccupation with simply categorizing data has a tendency to overlook meaning in the participants' responses. This is significant because constructivist grounded theory is as attentive to views and values as it is to acts and facts (Charmaz, 2000, p. 525). In the context of my research, tacit meanings in the participant responses should be examined because they may reveal valuable insights about the context and experience of history education in Singapore that might have otherwise been overlooked. Insights gathered here could be invaluable for interpreting the findings of this study.

In summary, this study sought to remain true to the tenets of grounded theory that privileges the role of data in the research, and how its analysis and use drives how the phenomenon studied is represented. However, in order to remain practical and realistic, I employed the use of Strauss' coding paradigm to assist with the data analysis and coding, whilst being attentive to the dangers of force-fitting data into preconceived frameworks and categories.

### **3.3.1 Cercadillo's typology of significance**

Cercadillo's typology for historical significance (see Table 3.1) has been selected for use in this study for the following reasons. Firstly, the typology was

developed as a direct result of empirical research on students' understanding of historical significance in England and Spain whereas other frameworks were not. Though the other frameworks are useful for helping students approach and articulate the concept of significance, they were conceived as heuristic tools for use in the classroom and are not reflective of students' understanding of significance. Hence, those frameworks would not serve as appropriate typologies for codifying and analyzing the students' responses gathered in this research study. Secondly, Cercadillo's typology is unique in that it was derived through both a deductive and inductive process – the data she based her typology on were analyzed and coded in light of the theoretical and philosophical debates about significance in history (Cercadillo, 2001, p. 123, 125). Not only does this typology give us an insight into the vocabulary and ways in which students approach the concept, it is simultaneously structured to be reflective of how significance is understood within the discipline.

<b>Types of significance</b>	<b>Characterizations from students' responses</b>
Contemporary	Phenomena seen as important by people at the time in the context of their perceptions, beliefs and view of the world.
Causal	Phenomena seen as having a causal relationship with later events or consequences.
Pattern	Phenomena seen as being significant in a wider context, usually in relation to concrete models of emplotment, such as concepts of progress and decline.
Symbolic	Phenomena seen as serving a moral example, implying particular uses of history.

<b>Types of significance</b>	<b>Characterizations from students' responses</b>
Present/Future	Phenomena seen as causal, operating in the long-term and including direct links to the future.

Table 3.1: Cercadillo's (2004) types of significance

For these reasons, the different types of significance from Cercadillo's typology served as helpful themes that guide the data analysis of my first research question, "What criteria do Singapore students use in their ascription of historical significance?". Using her specifications of the boundaries of each type of significance in her codebook (Cercadillo, 2000, p. 199-124), I employed a line-by-line analysis (see Carmaz, 2000) of the data. The benefit of using this method is that it keeps researchers attuned to their participants' views, whilst remaining open to refining any of the borrowed extant concepts. It also keeps researchers thinking about the meanings made of the data and constantly asking questions of it, pinpointing any existing gaps or leads in them in subsequent data collection and analysis (p. 515).

It should be noted at this point that although it is tempting to see some types of significance within the typology as more complex than others, Cercadillo cautions against using this typology as a progression model. She acknowledges that although her findings revealed that pattern, symbolic and present/future notions of significance occurred more frequently than contemporary and causal significance in older students, that alone cannot to be taken as an indication of progression. For progression to be more accurately determined, it needs to go

beyond assessing students' use of the attributions of significance and include an assessment of whether students grasp the relative and context-dependent nature of the concept. Hence, although the typology can serve to illuminate the criteria Singaporean students use in their ascription of significance; it would only answer my first research question.

Finally, the decision to use this typology is also a deliberate attempt to promote the use of a common vocabulary in the research on significance. Since Cercadillo's work has been well-accepted by others in the field of history education, using it as a basis for my study will help to create a platform to refine and extend the understandings of how students approach significance in history. Applying her typology in Singapore can inform its validity in contexts outside of the United Kingdom, Spain and Canada<sup>7</sup> and if applicable, suggestions will be made on how the typology or the progression model can be extended.

### **3.4 Ethics and trustworthiness**

The integrity of any research study is a function of both the ethical considerations taken during its course, as well as the trustworthiness of its findings. In this section, I briefly describe how I fulfilled both the ethical obligations and standards of trustworthiness involved in making this study a rigorous one.

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<sup>7</sup> Carla Peck (2009) has employed Cercadillo's typology in her exploration of Canadian students' understanding of historical significance.

### **3.4.1 Ethical considerations**

Since all of the participants in this study are under the age of majority, care was taken to ensure that informed consent was obtained, their right to privacy preserved and risks minimized, in accordance with the requirements of the Behavioral Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia. I arranged for two separate sessions with the students in all three participating schools. The first session was to personally meet with and brief the potential student participants about the nature and details of the study, and invite them to participate in it. The second session was to carry out the research study itself. On the day of the research study, I ensured that each of the students had submitted both theirs and their parents' signed forms of consent to be a part of the study before allowing them to participate.

### **3.4.2 Establishing trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability**

Since grounded theory as a qualitative approach identifies largely with the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, I drew upon Guba's (1981) criteria for ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings for studies of this nature. This involves attending to its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To achieve this, I adhered to the provisions advocated by Shenton (2004) that will buttress the trustworthiness of this study, summarized in Table 3.3 below.



Criteria	Provisions that may be made to ensure trustworthiness
Credibility	<p>Pertaining to the collection and method of data analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming familiar with culture of participating schools</li> <li>• Establishing tactics to ensure honesty in participants</li> <li>• Utilizing iterative questioning during the small-group interviews</li> <li>• Triangulating of data sources</li> <li>• Using a reflective commentary throughout the research process</li> <li>• Establishing a thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny</li> <li>• Examining previous research to frame findings</li> </ul> <p>Pertaining to researcher accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situating my background, qualifications and experience within the research</li> <li>• Adopting appropriate, well-established research methods</li> <li>• Debriefing sessions between myself and my supervisors</li> <li>• Creating an audit trail<sup>8</sup></li> </ul>
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing sufficient background information to establish the context of study and its participants to allow comparisons to be made</li> </ul>
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employing overlapping methods</li> </ul>
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admitting researcher's beliefs and assumptions</li> <li>• Identifying shortcomings in the study's methods and potential effects</li> <li>• Ensuring transparency in the description of methodology to allow the integrity of the research results to be scrutinized</li> <li>• Establishing a clear audit trail</li> </ul>

Table 3.2: Adaptation of Stenton's (2004) Provisions to Address Guba's Four Criteria for Trustworthiness

Although Stenton's (2004) list of provisions to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability appears itemized and separate in

<sup>8</sup> The idea to support a grounded theory research with an audit trail is taken from Bowen (2009).

the table above, they are all connected to and have an impact on each other. Hence, I will discuss them together in the paragraphs that follow.

Among Stenton's 14 provisions for establishing credibility, I identified 10 that resonate most with this study, and cited them in Table 2. After thinking carefully about each of them, I divided them into two broader categories – the first pertaining to the collection and method of data analysis and the second pertaining to researcher accountability. To ensure that my collection and method of data analysis is credible, I began by attempting to familiarize myself with the culture of the participating schools. I spoke with the teachers of the students I interviewed, and asked questions about how history is usually taught. As much as I was allowed to and could, I also befriended and asked students questions about their history classes whenever there were pockets of time before or after each research study. Although these conversations were not recorded, they helped me to understand the contexts and environments in which the students were learning history. However, due to the short timeframe of the study, my interactions with both the students and teachers were limited.

I also took care to ensure that the data I collected accurately reflected the experiences of the students and how they understood and used the concept of significance in history. As mentioned earlier, I explicitly reminded all participants that there is no 'correct' answer for the questions posed to them. I wanted to ensure that students offered answers that naturally occurred to them, and not give answers that they thought they should be giving, for fear of losing credibility

in the eyes of the researcher or fellow students. Whenever I had the opportunity to, especially in the small-group interviews, I affirmed each student's response. I also employed an iterative questioning strategy in the data collection when I used the small-group interview to verify and probe students' responses to questions posed in the survey questionnaire. When appropriate during the small-group interviews, I rephrased students' responses and repeated them back to them, seeking verification and clarification. The purpose of doing so was not so much to detect falsehoods and discard suspect data; but rather to ensure that I had captured students' responses in the best possible way.

The choice of conducting both a survey questionnaire and a small-group interview is my attempt to triangulate the data collected, since the data collected from both modes will be analyzed in tandem, compensating for their individual limitations whilst exploiting their respective benefits (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). In doing the line-by-line coding, I make as visible as possible the thought process I used to select and assign various codes to the data. Recording each step with thick descriptions forced me to be reflective throughout the analysis process, increasing the consistency in how the codes were applied. Although I used Cercadillo's typology of students' understanding of historical significance as a coding paradigm, I drew links to how the findings from the data related to other studies done, where relevant.

With regard to researcher accountability, I have clearly explained the position I took as a researcher toward this research study as well as toward the

data I collected. I also outlined in detail my method and process so as to enhance the transparency and rigor of my research. In addition to Shenton's provisions, I have also included Bowen's (2009) idea of creating an audit trail to document the research process. He argues that even though the complete audit trail will not be published for readers to see, one should be created as a matter of course, as it will help the researcher develop an overview of how interpretations of the data are produced and bolster confidence in the research results (p. 309). Finally, regular communication and consultation with my supervisors will ensure that the findings from this study are credible.

I would argue that once attention has been paid to the provisions for achieving credibility in this study, the demands of meeting the provisions of dependability, transferability and confirmability would also be met. For example, a study's dependability refers to its confidence of attaining similar results when it is repeated. Achieving a high level of dependability can be done through maintaining a proper documentation of the techniques and processes involved, which is very much part of the process of establishing a study's credibility. Likewise, to ascertain the transferability of the study, other researchers need to be clear about the context from which the study has originated, its limitations and the types of claims it makes in order to make meaningful comparisons with other contexts. This would also have been achieved in and through the provisions pertaining to credibility. Finally, when dealing with the confirmability of a study, a clear insight is needed on the researchers' positionality in relation to the

research, especially in relation to the beliefs that guide decisions made in how the data are selected, processed, analyzed and used. This too, would have already been made transparent when the provisions for ensuring the credibility of the study were attended to.

Having discussed how the issues of ethics and trustworthiness have been dealt with in this study, the last item that remains to be discussed is the limitations of this study. It is important to discuss this here because the limitations are related to, and influence the credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the study.

### **3.5 Limitations**

One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size of 50 students across three schools, which compromises the confirmability of the study. This is compounded by the inability to conduct a random sampling of students in each school, for reasons highlighted in section 3.2.1. However, as argued earlier, the study was never meant to be representative of all 14-year-old students in Singapore, but to demonstrate a range of responses that students may offer with regard to their understanding of significance in history. Rather than trying to assert conclusive statements about students' understanding and its implications for history education in Singapore, this study positions itself as an initial small-scale exploratory study, from which other studies can make improvements to and advance in the future.

Another limitation of this study is that it is unable to make conclusive statements about the factors that influence the ideas that students have about significance in history. This is largely due to the scope of the two main research questions. They are not designed to account for the extent of the impact that social or political factors (e.g. the role of identity, race, religion, political freedom) may have on students' ideas of significance. Although exploring such terrain would definitely yield fascinating findings, a conscious decision was made not to do so as it would expand the scope of the study indefinitely, and making it less focused and thereby unwieldy. Perhaps such a question could be explored in other similar but larger-scale studies in the future. For the present study, I have been content to just pose questions (in the small-group interviews) that encouraged students to articulate why they thought the way they did about various events in Singapore's history. This was done not in the hope of identifying the factors that influence why students hold the ideas they do, but to serve the purpose of helping me to attain a better understanding of their responses in general.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

With the helpful assistance from the teachers and staff of the three secondary schools, the data gathering process went very well. Once the data were collected and compiled, I proceeded with an initial reading, which proved both fascinating and confounding at the same time. It was fascinating because the candid nature of student responses promised to reveal much about students' attitudes and thinking about significance in history. However, their responses were also confounding because they were not always clear-cut – they sometimes lacked coherence, at times within each response and often between responses. It was not surprising to see students change their opinions as they proceeded through the survey, which affirmed the dynamic nature of such research where the research process itself serves as a platform for students to think through and develop their ideas. To exacerbate the situation, students answered in a manner that best made sense to them, and this did not necessarily adhere to any pre-determined adult or researcher models.

It is such complexity that made handling the data such a daunting task. It served as an opportune reminder for me to avoid conveniently 'pigeon-holing' the data and imposing external categories on them; but to humbly acknowledge instead that the frameworks we use as researchers are derived from adult conceptions. Though guided by the experience of working with young students,

we should remain open to acknowledging the inadequacies of frameworks; and be flexible enough to subject the frameworks to adjustment in response to the data. Hence, it was both the promise and presage of this set of data that made me realize how challenging analyzing and interpreting it would be.

Hence, this chapter will attempt to document this process, showcasing how the data gathered are used to answer both research questions as well as to discuss any pertinent issues about teaching significance that students' responses may raise. In addition, I offer a short critique of both Cercadillo's typology for historical significance, commenting on its applicability in the Singapore context based on the experience of using it for this research study. Finally, I take the discussion back to where it began, evaluating my findings in the light of the state of history education in Singapore and the issues the nation faces. As I embark on this chapter, I am cognizant that because the second-order concept of historical significance is not taught explicitly in Singapore schools, it might seem that my findings would only reveal the 'obvious' – that students are limited in their ability to reason or discuss significance in those terms. I would argue that even if this may be the case, it does not compromise the value of this research study. The purpose of this study goes beyond simply establishing whether or why students have an understanding of historical significance. Its value lies in its capacity to reveal the extent of complexity in students' understandings, the issues it raises as well as the implications for history educators in Singapore.



## 4.2 Criteria Singapore students use when ascribing significance to events

In order to answer the first research question, “What criteria do Singapore students use in their ascription of historical significance?” I chose to analyze the responses from questions 1a, 2a, 3 and 4 together. This might seem problematic as it separates the components of questions 1 and 2, appearing to disrupt the sequence of the questionnaire. This will not be the case because questions 1a, 2a, 3 and 4 were designed to distill the criteria students use when ascribing significance to events in Singapore’s history in various forms. Hence, analyzing them together allowed me to look for coherence between students’ responses as well as allowed me to ascertain the types of criteria and the frequency with which they are used. A summary of the questions are listed below in table 4.1.

No.	Question
1a	From your knowledge of Singapore’s history, select <b>THREE</b> events that you think are most significant and explain why you chose them.
2a	From your knowledge of Singapore’s history, select <b>ONE</b> event you think is least significant. List the event below and explain why you think it is least significant.
3	Is there any event that is not on the list in Booklet A that you think is very significant in Singapore’s history? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If you answered ‘Yes’, what is it and why do you think it is significant?
4	In general, what do you think makes things significant in history?

Table 4.1: Summary of questions analyzed to determine what criteria the participants use to ascribe significance to events

Among the four questions, 1a and 2a are questions that mirror each other. 1a asks students to explain why the events that they have chosen are most significant; and 2a, least significant. Question 3 is an extension of question 1a and it seems logical to consider them together. Although question 4 is slightly more abstract and is not tied to a given event, most responses are sufficiently comprehensible and can be coded in the same manner as questions 1a, 2a and 3. To augment the data from the survey questionnaire, I will also incorporate relevant data from the small-group interviews. These particular questions sought to clarify and deepen the discussion that began in the survey questionnaire.

#### **4.2.1 General observations**

On the whole, the data indicate that students rarely restrict themselves to employing a single criterion to assess significance, with only 4% of students doing so. In fact, the majority of the students (76%) used between 3-5 criteria (see chart 4.2), suggesting that they did not think of significance as a narrowly defined concept, and felt relatively at ease with ascribing significance in different ways for different events. While some students preferred to keep their responses brief, using and elaborating on one criterion to ascribe significance in history, there were others who offered detailed responses, ascribing two to three types of significance to a single event (e.g. acknowledging an event's causal significance first, and then considering its symbolic significance later in their explanations).

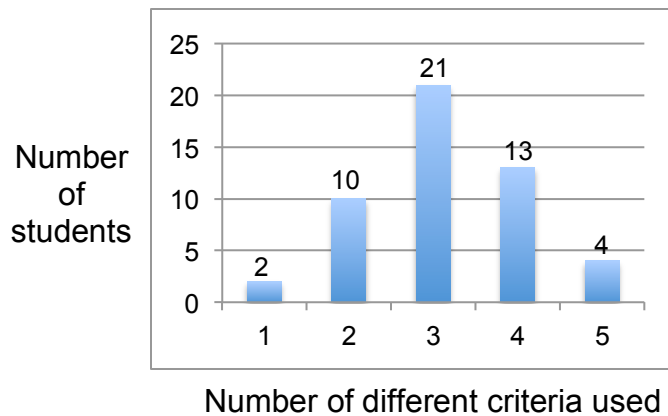
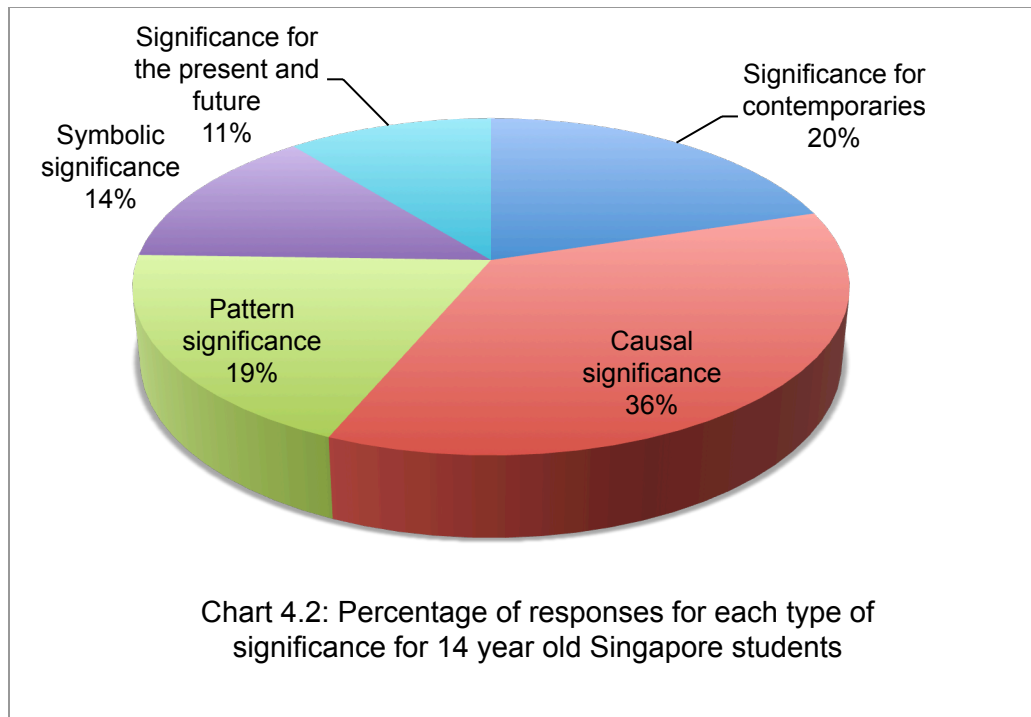


Chart 4.1: Distribution of students,  
according to number of different criteria used

Chart 4.2 below shows the number of incidences where a student employs a rationale for a type of significance to justify their choices in this group of questions. Although this research study is not intended to be comparative, it is interesting to note that the data are very much resonant with Cercadillo's findings for Year 10 (13 year olds) and Year 12 (15 year olds) students in both England and Spain. Causal and contemporary significance form the most frequently used types of significance, and there is a considerable margin between these two types of significance over the other types. Similarly, just as pattern significance ranks third, followed by symbolic significance and significance for the present and the future in Cercadillos' study, the same is the case here (See Cercadillo, 2000, p. 183).



Although chart 4.2 can be said to answer my first research question, this information alone is not helpful to teachers wanting to gain an understanding of how students deal with the concept of significance or the difficulties that hinder the potential that lies in their responses. Hence, the following sections are dedicated to do just that, a close analysis of student responses to reveal internal variations and the spectrum of sophistication within each level.

#### **4.2.2 Significance for contemporaries**

According to Cercadillo (2000), students often employ contemporary significance because it does not require them to reason very far away from the event itself. Those who employ this criterion tend to explain issues of significance in terms of what they think the views of its contemporaries are, and in terms of the immediate consequences (p. 212). The following are some examples:

...The Maria Hertogh Riot was also a reflection of the people's feeling at that point of time and showed their unhappiness at being treated lower than their Western counterparts.

Annabel, Frond Secondary School, Q1a.<sup>9</sup>

I feel that (an event is significant) if people feel that that particular matter made a huge impact to Singapore's society and the people's lives back then.

Noel, Frond Secondary School, Q4.

(The end of the Japanese Occupation) was significant because everyone wanted this war to end as soon as possible. When the Japanese Occupation ended, everyone was relieved and free.

Wei Chyi, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a.

These responses indicate that the students attempted to view the significance of the events from the perspectives of those who had lived through them. While these responses were relatively clear, students like Wei Chyi also imposed his own assumptions about what it must have been like in the past in the process of trying to understand an event's significance. Teachers need to be cautious when teaching students to consider contemporary significance since the issue of presentism, where students naturally assume that people living in different circumstances think in ways essentially similar to themselves (see Seixas & Peck, 2004, p. 113), are ever-present.

More pronounced examples are found when students unwittingly reduce the distance between themselves and the event they speak of, to the extent where their place in time becomes distorted. For example, in explaining the significance of the Japanese Occupation, Cheryl initially spoke of it in the past

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<sup>9</sup> All students responses represented in this chapter are represented ad verbatim, without the use of 'sic'.

tense, but her second sentence indicates that she believes that what the surrender of the Japanese meant in 1945 applies presently, in that “we” maintain an unchanging identity over the 50 years of history:

Singapore was free from its hardship and troubled lives when the Japanese Occupation ended. *We* do not have to deal them anymore nor live *our* lives in fear of being killed for no apparent reason at all.

Cheryl, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1a, emphasis mine.

The tendency to collapse time is also present in Dylan’s response, who claimed that Singapore’s separation from Malaya was significant because

(it) was when Singapore gained total independence which *we* have to rely on ourselves to get what we need for the country.

Dylan, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a, emphasis mine.

In the process of attempting to understand and empathize with events in the past, both Cheryl and Dylan had begun to lose their historical perspective, adopting a personal one instead, making their explanation almost ahistorical. I realized that this issue is accentuated the closer an event is to the present. For example, Alex’s rationale regarding the opening of the first Mass Rapid Transit line in 1987 was simply because

The MRT is our daily transportation. Without it, it could cause a lot of traffic in Singapore. It also reduces time needed to travel.

Alex, Frond Secondary School, Q1a.

Here, Alex does not distinguish between 1987 and the present, perhaps because of the proximity of the event to the present and the ubiquitous presence of the MRT in his daily life. He conflates the event itself (opening of the first MRT line) with its present function and purpose, and the thin line between the past and

the present becomes obscure to him, leading him to think about the everyday significance of the MRT in his life, rather than its historical significance which is defined by its context.

It seems that the main issue for students who attempt to discuss the significance of an event in relation to its contemporaries, is acknowledging and establishing its context. It is an issue that is present in the spectrum of responses here: from the clearer ones (see Annabel and Noel's) to the more confused ones (see Cheryl, Dylan and Alex's). Hence, while students have the potential to begin reasoning the significance of an event in relation to its contemporaries, the responses demonstrate only a cursory understanding of what that entails.

#### **4.2.3 Causal significance**

As shown in chart 4.2, causal significance is the most readily used when students attempt to justify the significance of an event. Singapore students were eager to explain that the significance of an event can be measured by its aftermath, and some were able to, in varying degrees, specifically qualify their choices based on either the scale of the impact (e.g. number of people affected), type of impact (e.g. political, social, economic) or its time-scale (e.g. long and short term), or a combination of them. Anas, for example, discussed the significance of the National Service Amendment Bill on a national scale, with reference to its positive impact of the economy:

(it) enhanced the strength of the defense force to attract foreign investors and developed the Singapore economy.

Anas, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a.

Other students like Belinda not only considered political and social ramifications, but also the long-term impact of an event when discussing the Maria Hertogh Riots:

Not only was the peace and harmony broken... the government had to rebuild (over time) the peace between the Europeans and the Malay Muslims... Like, (now) we have the Muslim court system, a whole court just for like, the internal domestic affairs for the Muslims. It is being sensitive to that culture, and that is something that came out very visibly from the Maria Hertogh Riot, right?

Belinda, Zinfandel Secondary School, interview.

Here, Belinda was able to acknowledge both the immediate effect (disruption of peace between races) and mid-term effects (the establishment of the Syariah Court in Singapore in 1957 to accommodate Muslim cultural practices in the judicial system) of the riot. Further on in the interview, she commented that the efforts to restore peace between races in Singapore have been ongoing since then, thus also acknowledging long term effects of the riot in the country.

A handful of other students were able to articulate causal reasoning with relative clarity, but unfortunately, not many responses were as comprehensive as Belinda's. Perhaps it was the interview that provided the platform for her to refine her ideas didactically, allowing for a better-developed response. For the majority of the other students, however, limitations in their reasoning about causal significance meant that most did not venture beyond discussing the scale of its impact. This is evidenced in question 2a when students were asked to select an



event and explain why they thought it was least significant. The following are some typical responses:

(The Hock Lee Bus Riots) only affected a small group of people and not the whole nation...

Jasmine, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q2a.

(The establishment of the Chinese protectorate) is not as significant as they only affected a small group of people: the Chinese community.

Alice, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q2a.

(The Bukit Ho Swee fire) is least significant because it did not occur in the whole nation, but just a particular place...

Alex, Frond Secondary School, Q2a.

Students' limited ability to reason in causal terms is also evident in question 4 where students were asked to explain what they thought, in general, made things significant in history. Although they were quick to cite terms such as 'impact', 'effect' and 'change' as a justification for causal significance, these ideas were rarely elaborated upon.

I think that their impact on the people's lives shows how significant they are.

Pei Wen, Caspian Secondary School, Q4.

I think that accomplishments, loss of lives or major destruction makes things significant in history.

Alice, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q4.

The impact it had on its people and in large scale, the world. Something negative or positive which is memorable.

Mingfa, Caspian Secondary School, Q4.

Perhaps it was the confines (time, space) of the survey questionnaire that discouraged them from attempting a more thorough explanation, but not all students were able to articulate their ideas more comprehensively in an interview

setting in the manner Belinda did. For example, despite the more casual atmosphere and gentle probing from me in the interview with students from Frond Secondary School, participants struggled to explain themselves, and could not reason beyond generic terms.

**Interviewer (I):** What do you think makes things significant, in general?

**Manju:** ...the seriousness of the event, like, the impact.

**I:** What do you mean by impact?

**Jian Rong:** Influence? Maybe how it changed the locals' attitude toward the Japanese (in relation to the Japanese Occupation of Singapore).

**I:** Is there anything else that makes things significant?

**Manju:** Big impact...

Although it is not obvious from this excerpt, Manju, was very vocal and enthusiastic throughout the interview. To see her struggle to find the right words to express herself made me realize that students really needed assistance to help them articulate the ideas they have. Her classmate, Jian Rong also could not get very far because he too, struggled to elaborate beyond the generic terms 'influence' and 'change'. This brought to mind an argument James Woodcock (2005) made about how the linguistic has the potential to release conceptual understanding of causation. He explained that when students are challenged to learn specific terms that describe historical phenomena or processes, they are empowered to learn in ways not possible with their existing vocabulary and schema. This is especially so when students put them in practice through writing, as it would require them to clarify and test their convictions, leading to more analytical ways of thinking which can release greater conceptual understanding

regarding causation in history (pp. 5-6). Hence, although many students in this study employed causal reasoning as a means to evaluate an event's significance, their explanations were neither well developed nor substantiated, but rather were probably hindered by their inability to clearly articulate their thoughts.

Cercadillo (2000, pp. 215-220) also acknowledges the importance of having a strong understanding of the second-order concept of causation itself when discussing causal significance. While she acknowledged the importance of having students know and distinguish between different types of impact and the consequences that result from an event (as discussed above), she also expressed concerns that students sometimes offer overly simplistic explanations of the significance of a particular event in leading to particular outcomes, as if it were the sole and main cause. This is problematic because students become inattentive to other important and related ideas such as background conditions, proximate causes, necessary or sufficient causes; main causes and contributory causes, all of which give the necessary texture and depth to a discussion on causation in history.

Having monocausal ideas may seem innocuous on its own, especially since the students in this study have only been exposed to history for two years in their school life. Perhaps they should not be expected to have developed such complex understanding about causation. However, I argue that if monocausal ideas are allowed to persist, students mistakenly develop and reinforce an idea

that history is nothing more than a linear sequence of events that unfolds statically like a chronicle. They are not challenged to discover how causal links between historical phenomena have the potential to be very dynamic. This makes them prone to employing counter-factual arguments in their ascription of causal significance, as a number of responses in this study demonstrate. Take the following responses for example:

(Pertaining to the significance of the arrival of the British) If the British hadn't arrived in Singapore during that time then we would not have evolved into a prosperous fishing village, and then a trading port with much popularity... What we are now are all because the British decided to make us a crown colony...

Isaac, Frond Secondary School, Q1a.

...without the British arriving in Singapore, it would not be found to this day.

Alice, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1a.

Both Isaac and Alice attempted to assess the significance of their chosen event relative to its consequences, which is both a logical and historical way to ascribe significance. However, their monocausal ideas lead them to place overwhelming causal primacy on an event and this is problematic on two counts: first, because it has neglected other causes, students do not have an opportunity to break out of their simplistic ideas about causation and begin considering the causal weighting of this event in relation to others. Secondly, affording unquestioned causal primacy to an event may lead students to mistakenly conclude that the significance of an event in causing another is due to its inherent properties. When students become accustomed to reasoning in this manner, they do not have the opportunity to consider the idea of authorship in the ascription of

significance in history: where a historian's purposes and standpoint determine which phenomenon in history is deemed significant and in what manner. Significance is seen as fixed and inherent in an event, rather than variable according to the context and its author.

Hence, I would say that although the Singapore students who participated in this study seemed disposed to ascribing causal significance to events in history, there is much that can be improved in the manner in which they do so. The challenge ahead lies in helping them refine and develop their conceptual understanding of causation in relation to significance in history.

#### **4.2.4 Pattern significance**

Pattern significance accounts for almost a fifth of student's attempts to explain why they thought an event was significant in history, on par with significance for contemporaries. For this category, responses that discussed the significance of an event in relation to others within a developmental account were coded as having ascribed pattern significance. This was not an easy job to do, especially since student responses were not always as precise as I hoped, making it hard for me to distinguish between those that drew causal links between historical phenomenon and those that did so whilst attempting to place them in a broader series of events in order to identify trends or patterns such as change, continuity, progress and decline.

Cercadillo (2000) posits that pattern significance indicates a higher level of sophistication in students' answers because it is always allied to contextuality, and refers to concrete models of emplotment (p.121-122). I have found that these 14 year-old Singapore students possess the capacity to employ this logic of ascribing significance, and some of their ideas can be quite well formed. Take the following responses for example:

(The 1948 elections) was the very first election for Singapore. It was the first step to Singapore's internal self-government.

Sathya, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a.

(The arrival of the British in Singapore is significant) because this event is the start of Singapore's development and where Singapore started to grow from an island covered with forests to a trading port.

Amirah, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1a.

Things that are significant in history are events that help to shape a country into what it is today. These events may be good or bad but they are stepping stones for which we can build our country's foundation on and which the world recognizes...

Annabel, Frond Secondary School, Q4.

Sathya's reference to the 1948 elections as being 'the very first election' already demonstrates that he is able to see this as a break from the past, a beginning of a series of changes in a longer trajectory of events that would eventually pave the way for Singapore's internal self-government. The same can be said of Amirah's response as she too thought that the significance of the arrival of the British lay in its role in setting in motion a series of events that would change Singapore from what it was in 1819, to a trading port. Annabel's response too, did the same, explaining it in more abstract terms.

Conversely, when explaining which event was not significant to them and why, at least two students cited Singapore's first Olympic medal as being least significant, on the basis that they could not place it within a larger narrative in Singapore's history.

Although Singapore won her first Olympic medal in 1960, Singapore did not win any medals subsequently at the Olympics for 48 years until 2008.

Loon Wei, Caspian Secondary School, Q2a.

(It's not significant because) Singapore won her first Olympic medal in 1960. Tan Howe Liang beat 33 other competitors. However, ever since then, it has been 48 years until another medal...

Shaln, Frond Secondary School, Q2a.

Initially, I found these two responses quite vague and could not understand what the basis of their explanation was. After several rounds of re-reading, it occurred to me that both Loon Wei and Shaln were unable to place this event within a broader series of events or a familiar narrative. For them, there was no visible pattern of achievement that followed (e.g. consecutive medals), and they could not find a justification for placing this event within the broader narrative of the nation's history (a dominantly political history). To them, this event seemed awkward and out of place, unlike the other events listed in Booklet A, and this led them to identify it as the least significant event. To verify this, I wanted to see if Loon Wei and Shaln also employed the notion of pattern significance in 'reverse' when selecting and explaining what they thought were the most significant events in Singapore's history. Interestingly, Shaln used

pattern notions of significance to justify two out of the three events, and Loon Wei did so for all three of his choices; supporting my interpretation of their responses.

Since Cercadillo argued that the ascription of pattern significance reflects a higher degree of sophistication, it is indeed encouraging to know that almost 20% of the participants were able to reason comfortably and discuss significance in these terms. However, it might be worthy to note that the majority of the students gave explanations that were in line with the narrative of the textbook when justifying their choices. As such, I have reason to believe that the textbook has strongly influenced students' ability to reason in this aspect. This may also be attributed to the aims of the syllabus, one of which is for students to "acquire a better understanding of the key *developments* and historical milestones in Singapore's history" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, p. 3, emphasis mine). This is done mostly through the presentation of the history of Singapore as a single coherent narrative (see Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007). Which serves as a powerful structure that determines which events in Singapore's history are included, how they relate to each other as well as how they are discussed.

In this case, the dominance of the narrative has enabled students to think of phenomena in history as more than just a series of discrete occurrences. They have been enabled, and can ascribe significance according to what they perceive to be the event's role in the dominant narrative's developmental account of Singapore's history. I choose to see this as something positive, a good start to



helping students understand what pattern significance means and entails. However, going forward, I would argue that educators can use this as an opportunity to deepen students' understanding of the concept of significance. Take Sathiya's and Amira's responses for example: although they display a basic understanding of emplotment in history, their ideas seem rather deterministic and fixed, in accordance with the dominant narrative they have been presented with. Depending on the student ability, teachers can choose to complicate this by introducing students to the idea that links between phenomena in history are not always fixed, but are constructed as part of a narrative; and that an event can be used in different accounts and in different ways.

#### **4.2.5 Symbolic significance**

According to Cercadillo (2000), because symbolic significance can operate from both the perspective of people from the past and from the perspective of subsequent presents, it may seem to overlap with responses coded for contemporary significance or significance for present and the future. However, unlike the other types, the distinguishing factor for responses coded for symbolic significance is that it is attached specifically to notions of moral example (lessons from history) and mythical past; and often implies a particular 'use of history' related to issues of national identity and partisanship (p.123). In the case of this study, I have found that although there were responses that discussed symbolic significance with reference to its contemporaries (people living then), the majority of students chose to discuss it in the context of the significance it

holds for the present. Noel's example below is one of the few that explained the significance of the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese in 1945 in relation to its contemporaries:

The surrender to the Japanese served as a lesson to the British for underestimating the Japanese... The locals in Singapore then started to realize that they should not rely on the British to stay safe, and that they should govern themselves instead.

Noel, Frond Secondary School, Q1a.

Noel understood that while the fall of Singapore served as an immediate lesson to the British, the surrender of the British also was symbolic to the people living at that time, because it brought about a change in the mindset of the people. Since Noel also explained that this mindset change was a turning point ('the locals in Singapore started to realize...') in leading to a desire for self-governance, I also coded his response as having employed pattern significance.

With the exception of Noel's response, the majority of the other responses explained the symbolic significance of an event in relation to the present.

The racial riots tell Singaporeans to remember what Singapore would be if we did not respect one another despite of different races.

Dylan, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a.

(The Maria Hertogh Riot) sparked off a racial and religious misunderstanding between the Eurasians and the Malays. Current government and people learnt (sic) from this event and ensured that there will be no repeat of such things in Singapore's future.

Belinda, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1a.

Both Dylan's and Belinda's responses were quite clear in establishing that the Maria Hertogh Riot and Racial Riots were symbolic: in terms of the lesson it

teaches about the necessity for mutual respect in a country like Singapore. Belinda's response even seemed to suggest that the lesson was transcendental when she explained that "current government and people learnt from this lesson" and "ensured that there will be no repeat of such things in Singapore's future." Thus, I also coded her response as explaining the significance of the Mariah Hertogh Riot in both symbolic terms as well as in terms of its significance for the present and future.

In a way, it does not come as a surprise to me that most students are more inclined toward describing the symbolic significance of an event in terms of its meaning for the present than in terms of its meaning for its contemporaries. Just as students' tendency to ascribe pattern significance to events in Singapore history can be attributed to a specific curriculum aim (see section 4.2.4), I argue that the same case can be applied here. According to the syllabus document (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, p. 2), a general aim of the syllabus is to "enable students to acquire a sound knowledge of and learn *lessons* from local and regional history (emphasis mine)." The lessons here do not merely pertain to 'knowledge' outcomes, as they also include lessons in values and attitudes for present day living, evidenced by the syllabus' goal of "instil(ling) a sense of loyalty, pride and commitment to Singapore" (p. 4). Given that the citizenship aims of the history curriculum are fairly overt, it can be assumed that the events included in the textbook narrative serve not only the 'knowledge' but also the 'values and attitudes' aims of the curriculum. Although

delving into specific examples here goes beyond the scope of my discussion, several other history and social studies educators have come to similar conclusions that support this claim (see Loh, 1998; Goh & Gopinathan, 2005; Han, 2007; Sim & Ho, 2010; Baildon & Suhaimi, 2013; Loh & Jaffar, 2013). Hence, given that such is the context for history education in Singapore, it does not come as a surprise that the majority of the students who employ symbolic significance when justifying their choices do so in terms of its relevance to the present.

Although I do not think that there is any problem with this, one student's response made me think more deeply about what the possible ramifications could be if students get too used to ascribing symbolic significance to events for presentist purposes. In response to a separate question, she happened to mention that

history (is) created for us to learn from it, to avoid making the same mistakes in our future, and to create a better life for all of us. I do not see a reason in studying something that will not be used again in our lives.

Aneza, Frond Secondary School, Q2b.

Her statement seems rather revealing and while there is much to discuss about it, I focus specifically on that which deals with symbolic significance. Not only does Aneza value the symbolic significance in events in serving as lessons for the present, she has extended this by applying it to the whole purpose of history education. She asserts that if history does not offer lessons for us in the present, then there is no value in history at all. Even though this student's comment is not

representative of all students, it brings to light an extremely pragmatic and 'presentist' view that students can have if they are only exposed to a history that advocates teaching lessons for the purposes of the present.

Her comments remind us as educators that when teaching the significance of an event to students, it is imperative to go beyond its symbolic meaning for us in the present. We do not want to perpetuate or reinforce any misconceptions that the purpose of history is to teach lessons that serve only the goals of the present. Not only does this come at the expense of developing in students an understanding of what the discipline of history really is, it also has the propensity to perpetuate an authoritative, unproblematic and dogmatic approach to the past.

#### **4.2.6 Significance for the present and the future**

According to Cercadillo's (2000) coding framework, significance for the present and the future is closely related to causal, pattern and symbolic significance, but it is differentiated in that it would only include responses that discuss the long-term significance of an event, explained through terms of influence, legacy and posterity, when the bond with the future is emphasized (p.63). I found this the trickiest among Cercadillo's typology to differentiate and code, because there were occasions where students made connections between the events in the past with present realities through their ascription of pattern and symbolic significance. For such responses, I re-read them closely to determine

where an explicit link between the past and the present was made and for those that did, I assigned them as having coded for both types of significance.

Cercadillo posits that the types of responses that are coded in this category can range from the sense of linear endless transmission, to a contextualized and thus complex comparison of the significance of an event in different presents (pp. 123-124, 240). Unfortunately, not many responses displayed that sort of complexity as many students drew extremely superficial connections between the past and present, where they saw the present state of life as dependent on one big event. The students displayed a faith in a teleological progress of history, as seen in the following examples:

(Referencing the arrival of the British in Singapore) Singapore might not be what it is today if the British did not come.

Yilin, Caspian Secondary School, Q1a.

(Referencing the separation from Malaysia and Singapore's independence) Having the separation was the most significant event in Singapore as we could be able to go on our own (sic) and develop Singapore until now.

Joanne, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1a.

These ideas carried through even to question 4 where participants were asked about what they thought made things significant in history:

“Significant things are what happened before that made things what they are today.”

Dave, Caspian Secondary School, Q4.

There were some students, albeit very few, who were able to move beyond such teleological ideas and discuss significance for the present and future in more concrete terms. Take Joey's response for example. In the small-

group interview at Zinfandel Secondary School, she explained that the period of merger and separation was a time of learning because “there were a lot of disagreements about how Malaya ran their government and how Singapore wanted to run it.” And while she acknowledged that the outcome of the disagreements was separation from Malaya, it was “a good learning lesson for the leaders of Singapore”. Although she initially paused there, I took the opportunity to clarify if she was referring to leaders living in the past or living in the present. With this prompt, she clarified that she actually meant both the leaders living then and living now. See her explanation below:

**Joey:** Ya, so it (referring to the separation) was a good learning lesson, I guess.

**I:** A good learning lesson for who?

**Joey:** Oh the future leaders of Singapore.

**I:** The people at that time or are you referring to leaders who are living today?

**Joey:** Lee Kuan Yew<sup>10</sup>... I’m sure it made the biggest impact on Lee Kuan Yew, and his generation because he could really know how to deal with stuff when we separated. And it was also a good guideline and manual for the next batch of leaders not to walk and go through the same mistakes, with regard to the discrimination and alliance and everything... so.., it just helped them to learn.

Joey was able to show that the separation was significant for those who lived then, and that also came to carry a symbolic significance for those in subsequent presents. Hence, I coded her response for both having ascribed symbolic significance as well as significance for the present and the future. Joey was one of the few students who could contemplate and differentiate the significance of

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<sup>10</sup> By citing Lee Kuan Yew, Joey is referring to the leaders at that time as Lee Kuan Yew was then the Prime Minister of Singapore.

an event specifically across different times. Although they were few in number, this demonstrates that 14 year-olds can develop the capacity to think about significance in more dynamic ways – that is to explore the significance of event beyond its relationship to the present, and across different contexts. Even though in Joey's example, the significance of an event remained rather unchanged across time and context, I would argue that helping students differentiate between and contextualize the various points in the past is the first step in helping them recognize that significance is not a static attribute, and may not necessarily remain the same over time. It is when students are introduced to more layered understandings of significance, that they may then be better placed to contemplate how significance is not fixed but is variable depending on its context, how it is spoken of and who ascribes it.

In these sections, I have responded to my first research question by showing what criteria students use in their ascriptions of significance in history. I have also attempted to be thorough and comprehensive in my analysis by going beyond numbers and beyond showing the range of responses in each category, to identifying and discussing the issues that I believe contribute to or impede students' explanations or their way of thinking about significance. From my research, I have observed two things. First, while common or everyday notions of significance enable students to engage with the idea of significance in history, this study has made visible the gap between their common understanding of significance and a historical understanding of significance. Second, through my



discussion of the types of significance students use and the issues surrounding it, it has become evident that students' ability to see whether significance is fixed or variable will have a large impact on their ability to reason and discuss significance in a historical manner. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I turn my focus to students' ability to do so, analyzing the questions in my research instruments that have been designed specifically to understand if students treat significance as fixed or variable.

### **4.3 Students' treatment of historical significance – fixed or variable?**

To explore the second question of my thesis, I will draw from student responses to a second set of questions from the survey questionnaire. These questions are summarized in the table below. The focus would be on questions 1b, 2b, 2d and 5c, as these questions specifically require students to either state if they think the significance of an event is variable, and to rationalize their choices. Though not directly relevant in the same way, questions 2c, 5a and 5b have been included because they are part of the series of questions in the survey questionnaire for the students. Reading through them would provide a context for interpreting student responses to the other questions as well as an opportunity to check for consistency across.

No.	Question from survey questionnaire
1b	Look back to the first event you listed in Qn 1a. Do you think that the significance of this event in Singapore's history can change over time? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Explain why.

No.	Question from survey questionnaire
2b	Do you think most other people would agree with your choice in question 2a? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Depends Explain why.
2c	If someone wanted to argue that the event you selected as least significant is really the most significant, how might they do so?
2d	Do you think their reasons are valid? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Explain why.
5a	What do you think Historian A finds significant in the early history of Singapore?
5b	What do you think Historian B finds significant in the early history of Singapore?
5c	Do you think the two historians agree about what is significant in the early history of Singapore? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Explain why.

Table 4.2: Summary of questions analyzed to determine if students see significance as fixed or variable

A preliminary study of the data suggests that the answer to this research question will not be straight-forward. This is because it is through these questions that many of the students are exploring the concept of variability in significance for the first time, especially since they are not taught this concept specifically in their syllabus. Since students are used to a parochial form of history, contemplating the possibility of a deviation from the dominant narrative or variations among accounts would be rather novel. Hence, their responses may not be as well thought-through or logically consistent as a researcher might hope for. Also, the research question itself is not as straightforward or as close-ended

as it seems. Instead of simply searching for a hard-and-fast answer about the number of students that see significance as fixed or variable, I aim to present to findings that can reflect the nuances and complexities in students' responses. In doing so, I also make a case of what I think this says about their understanding of significance and the implications it has for history education.

#### **4.3.1 'What's done has already been done' – strong inclinations toward perceiving significance as intrinsic to an event.**

The responses I first examined were those of question 1b, where I discovered that 58% percent of the participants did not think that the significance of the event they chose in Singapore's history could change over time. A few ideas dominate their explanations – a belief that the present state of affairs will endure, the assumption that there is only one account of the past, as well as the inability to distinguish between the event itself and the significance accorded to it.

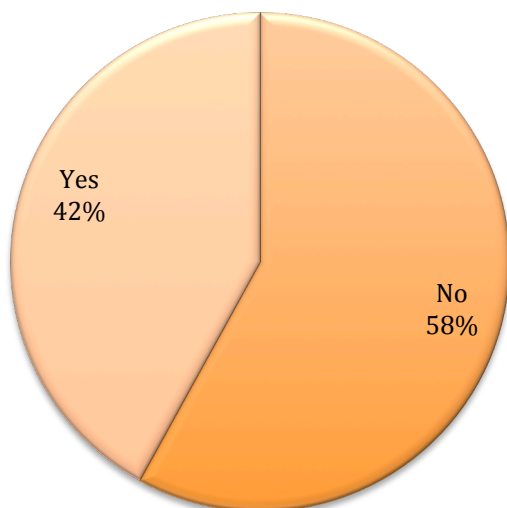


Chart 4.3:  
Percentage of students who think that the  
significance of their chosen event can  
change over time.

Students expressed these ideas in a number of ways, mostly typified in the following examples:

This was the day where the history of Singapore all started.  
Nothing can change the importance of this day.

Syazwan, Frond Secondary School, Q1b.

During the Japanese Occupation, many lives were lost or tortured. Those tortured were innocent and they were so brutal that no one can ever change the significance of this event over time.

Alice, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1b.

The Maria Hertogh Riots will always help to remind us that we need to have harmony between all races or fights might occur between different racial groups again. The significance of this events and all other historical events in general will not change as they are a reminder of the consequences should we ever repeat the same mistakes...

Annabel, Frond Secondary School, Q1b.

It already happened so it cannot be changed.

Yilin, Caspian Secondary School, Q1b.

What's done has already been done.

Jack, Caspian Secondary School. Q1b.

Students like Alice, Syazwan and Annabel merely reverted to explaining why the event they chose was significant, as if repeating their responses to question 1a. While their responses differed in how thorough they were, what is common about them is a sense that they see the future as an extension of the present. Since the events are considered significant in the present, and because they impose present conditions onto the future, the significance of the event becomes to them obvious and indisputable, as if frozen for all time. Most students' explanations were made along these lines. I would also like to mention Yilin's and Jack's

responses specifically, because they are very revealing of a simplistic understanding that underlies most of these students' explanations about significance in history, and even perhaps of history in general. Both of these students equate the event itself, which took place in the past, as synonymous with how the event is spoken about. For them, there is only one account of the past, and its significance cannot be changed, in the same way the event itself cannot be changed. This points to an issue in history education that I raised earlier on (see section 1.1), that many students find it difficult or are unable to differentiate between history and the past.

Even though the remaining 42% of the participants thought that the significance of an event could change over time, a closer examination of their explanations revealed something interesting. Even though they thought that the significance of an event could change, it is only because of a change in perception, circumstances and context, and not so much because the meaning that the event in question holds changes.

Some people may think that the event occurred too long ago to learn much from it and reflect on it.

Cheryl, Zinfandel Secondary School, Q1b.

(The significance of an event will change) if more major events occur to Singapore a few more decades down the road... the significance of the event might change gradually depending on the following events that have yet to occur.

Yu Teng, Frond Secondary School, Q1b.

Cheryl's response suggests that the significance of an event changes because too much time has transpired in between, rendering it less relevant. But the

meaning of the event or what it is remembered for may not necessarily change. Yu Teng's answer is similar, except that she added another qualifier – comparison with other events. For her, the significance of an event is not only likely to fade with time, but also because she thinks it would pale in comparison to other more significant events in the future. Other students like Jeevaneesh thought that it is changing circumstances that makes particular lessons irrelevant. With reference to the Maria Hertogh Riot and its lesson regarding racial harmony, he thought that the significance of the event would decrease “since Singapore now has racial harmony and it is recognized throughout the world.” His response indicates that he thinks that since present circumstances reflect that the lesson from the Maria Hertogh Riot has been ‘learnt’, its significance would decrease, thus changing over time. The lesson itself though, remains unchanged.

What is interesting is that these students' responses bear a subtle similarity with those who thought that the significance of an event could not change over time. Their responses indicated an inclination toward the understanding that the meaning of an event is intrinsic and closely tied to the event itself, albeit in a more nuanced manner. This finding, together with the fact that 58% of the students asserted a strong belief that significant events cannot be changed over time suggests that the majority of these students subscribe to a unitary understanding of the past, one that they think is unlikely to be subject to revision.

#### 4.3.2 “Different people have different feelings and thoughts” – A surprising discovery

Given that the majority of the students seemed inclined toward a singular version of the past, I wondered how open they would be when asked if they thought others would agree with their choices of what they thought was least significant in history in question 2b. Interestingly, only 10 students (20%) answered affirmatively, and restated their stance that there could be no sensible account other than that which they have asserted. Instead, there was a large number of students, 37 of them (74%) – who opted for ‘Depends’ (see chart 4.6), indicating that despite their initial perceptions in question 1b that significance may well be tied to an event itself, they were also actually rather open to the idea that there can be differing interpretations of an event’s significance.

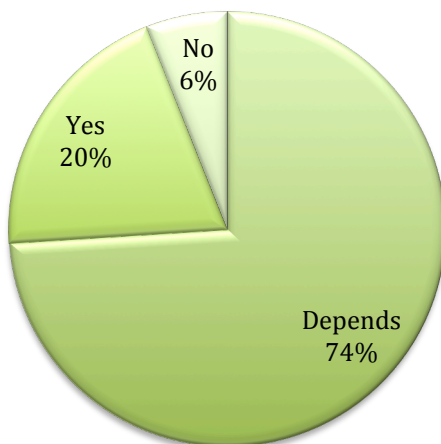


Chart 4.4:  
Percentage of students who  
think that others would agree  
with their choice of a significant  
event

I found this to be rather surprising. When asked to explain what exactly a person’s choice would ‘depend’ on, students offered a variety of responses. A

couple reasoned with the examples they selected, explaining that different opinions from each person would account for whether or not they would agree:

I think that it depends on one's interest in the Olympics. Surely one who enjoys sports would probably know more of this event than one who hates the Olympics...

Shalin, Zindanfel Secondary School, Q2b.

Some may find that it is the start of Singapore's history so its important. But some may find that it's just a small event.

Wei Chyi, Caspian Secondary School, Q2b.

Some might agree with me that the winning of Singapore's first Olympic medal pales in comparison to other events. However some might disagree as winning the Olympic medal would earn Singapore fame and glory.

Annabel, Frond Secondary School, Q2b.

Most other students reasoned in more abstract terms, but their answers were still confined to citing differences in opinions as the influencing factor of whether or not others will agree with them.

Everyone has their own feelings towards each event. There is no definite way of understanding the subject of history... it depends on each person's own mindset and understanding of the event and the point of view they are looking at.

Noel, Frond Secondary School, Q2b.

It depends as people have different views on the significance of events...

Joey, Zinfandel Secondary School. Q2b.

Different people have different feelings and thoughts.

Jun Hao, Caspian Secondary School, Q2b.

The conversations within the interviews also yielded similar results, even though I had the opportunity to probe further in the small group setting. Students were still unable to reason beyond that which was immediately obvious.



**I:** Why do you think people choose different events as significant in history?

**Vivien:** Different people have different mindsets?

**I:** What do you mean by mindset?

**Vivien:** Like, different people think differently.

**Wei Chyi:** Maybe they have certain ideas, like certain things that make the event more important and some people think that.

**Vivien:** Or maybe people think it is important because a lot of people know about it... whereas some people may not think that is important.

**I:** Why do you think people are different that way?

**Jack:** They have different viewpoints?

**I:** What do you mean by different viewpoint?

**Vivien:** Like people view things from different perspectives?

(Extract from the interview with students from Caspian Secondary School)

For those who answered 'No' and were certain that others would not agree with their choice, their explanations very much resembled those above that chose 'Depends', in that they all attributed the ability or potential to disagree to differences in opinion, something that they assumed each person is entitled to.

Given the kind of responses gathered in question 1b as well as the parochial manner in which Singapore's history is taught, I was pleasantly surprised that nearly three quarters of the students would see significance as variable from person to person, and were able to rationalize their responses fairly confidently through arguing that each person has their own personal viewpoints, bias and prejudices. That said, I also realized quite quickly that the manner in which the students were reasoning revealed a lack in their understanding of why significance can vary from person to person. While individual viewpoints and bias might appear to be a valid and logical response, students may soon discover that

they have no way of deciding which accounts are valid, should they be confronted with more than one. This was evident from students' responses to question 2d, where almost all of the students (91%) who thought that others would either disagree or potentially disagree with what they thought was least significant in history, thought that those other reasons were valid too. In justifying their responses, some even took on perspectives that opposed their own and gave reasons why they might be valid, and others simply reasoned by reasserting their stand that each person is entitled to their own perspective in history. To them, it seemed that since everyone has a personal bias, all opinions must necessarily be equal, and are thus as valid as they are invalid.

What is absent in this way of thinking is a thorough understanding of authorship in history which goes beyond personal opinions and gives consideration to the contexts in which significance is ascribed as well as to understand that on top of it all, events derive their significance from their placement in a historian's narrative. This is something Seixas and Morton (2012) have emphasized as one of the four guideposts that can help students understand the concept of historical significance and which I have also argued earlier on is essential for capturing the essence of the concept as practiced in the discipline of history (see section 2.2.2). This made me realize that answering this research question is not only about ascertaining if students are able to see significance as fixed or variable. Perhaps, what is equally essential, is to understand how in-depth their understanding of this aspect of significance is, in

order to identify problems in their understanding and think about ways to address it.

It is at this juncture that I turned to question 5, as I anticipated that it could provide me with insights into students' ideas about different perspectives when ascribing significance to an event. I was hopeful about this, since the questions required them to explain why they think it is possible for two separate accounts regarding the early history of Singapore to exist side by side. Unfortunately, students' responses to question 5 did not yield any additional insight to how students rationalized this because all the students were preoccupied with the content of the accounts, explaining which aspects of the accounts the historians agreed or disagreed on, instead of accounting for why they were different. This was very disappointing for me, and is an aspect of the survey questionnaire that I would improve, should this study be repeated. In a bid to avoid asking overtly leading questions, question 5 was deliberately crafted to be both open ended and open for interpretation, allowing for a breadth of answers. In hindsight, the question might have more effectively served its purpose if its focus was narrowed further and the question tweaked specifically to probe students' accounts of different perspectives when ascribing significance in history, with a caution not to word it in ways that would engender certain answers.

#### **4.3.3 “The power of the story and the power of the textbook”: Making sense of these findings in the context of history education in Singapore**

Having examined the data, I was faced with an interesting conundrum. In attempting to find out if students saw the significance of an event as variable or fixed, I discovered that students were much more ready to think of significance as variable from person to person than to think of significance as variable over time. Why would this be the case? What does it say about the extent of students’ understanding and the way history is taught to them? Since the survey questionnaire could not offer any more answers, I decided to revisit the transcripts of the small group interviews I conducted, where I made it a point to ask the students to account for the differences in how significance is ascribed in history, albeit in slightly different ways among the different schools. Perhaps the interactive nature of the interviews would reveal more about students’ thinking and help me to make sense of the findings. It was this interview with the participants from Frond Secondary School when I began to gain an understanding what the fundamental issue was.

**I:** So, why do the four of you have different ideas about what is significant in history?

**Manju:** Different people have different perspectives in life? (the rest laugh)

**Jian Rong:** Is it because we have different criteria on how or whether an event is significant or not in the history of Singapore?

**Isaac:** Different thoughts, or different views?  
(pause)

**Manju:** I think it is about the different exposure that is shown to us. Mostly these events that we chose (as significant) were the ones that were emphasized to us, and maybe that is why...

Manju's and Isaac's immediate responses were consistent with what the questionnaire already revealed: that the majority of the students are likely to explain the differences in what people find significant in history through using personal viewpoints, bias and prejudices. Jian Rong's response was of a slightly different calibre, as he offered the use of criteria as the means to explain why people would judge events differently. However, he did not elaborate further as to why people had different criteria. Among all the comments, it was Manju's response at the end of the extract that got me thinking. Manju explained that aside from having different perspectives, what influences how people ascribe significance in history is their level of exposure to certain events. Those who hear about and discuss a particular event more will think of it as more significant than others. When asked to elaborate further, she explained that her history teacher particularly emphasized the Japanese Occupation as a significant event when teaching Singapore's history, and that influenced her to think in the same manner. Immediately when she said this, the rest of her classmates in the interview started to chime in and agree. When I asked them what they thought about Manju's response, they said:

**Together:** School notes, textbooks, Ms Neo (their history teacher). It's all from Ms Neo's mouth actually!

**I:** Are there other places where your exposure to these events come from?

**Jian Rong:** Maybe the family?

**Manju:** Primary School Social Studies? Documentaries?

The students from Frond Secondary School unanimously agreed that what they thought was significant in Singapore's history was very much affected by

how much they've encountered it, and it seemed that apart from their families and the media, the school curriculum played a large role in shaping their perceptions. Their way of reasoning brought to mind the interview with Zinfandel Secondary School, where another student, Joey, reasoned along similar lines. When asked about whether she thought significance of a particular event (in this case, the Maria Hertogh Riot) could change over time, she explained:

**I:** Do you think there may come a time where people just look back and think differently about the Maria Hertogh Riot?

**Joey:** Actually in the questionnaire, I wrote no, because I feel that as long as history is taught in school, it would not go far out, as in significance (sic). I mean, people have to remember it. As long as we continue to learn (about our past) and have stories like that, it should never... the significance will never go away.

**I:** So are you saying that as long as there is a history textbook that narrates the significance of a particular event like the Maria Hertogh Riot, its significance will not change?

**Joey:** It may not change as much as like really dying down. Because of the power of the story, the power of the textbook and school and things like that.

It was Joey's comment about "the power of the story, power of the textbook and school and things like that" that really enabled me to make sense of my findings in two ways. Firstly, this interview excerpt, together with that from Frond Secondary School confirms what I had suspected all along – that the current history syllabus – its aims, learning objectives, content, structure and pedagogy is one of the strongest influences in shaping how students think about significance in history. Michael Apple (1991) describes this well when he notes that rather than being a mere simple 'delivery system', textbooks are at once the results of political, economic and cultural activities, battles and compromises. Apart from the students' own recognition of its influence, as well as the examples

I've given to demonstrate its influence in the earlier sections in this chapter, a scan of the textbook also supports this claim. In the table below, I have extracted the contents of the textbook (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007, iii) and presented them below in table 4.3 to demonstrate how the structure of the content supports a dominant narrative.

Chapter	Contents
1	Was there Singapore before 1819?
2	Who was the founder of Singapore?
3	What part did the different immigrant communities play in Singapore's development?
4	How did the British govern Singapore before World War II?
5	How did external events before World War II affect Singapore?
6	How did World War II affect Singapore?
7	How did the local people respond to British rule after World War II?
8	How did Singapore progress to internal self-government (1955-1959)?
9	How did Singapore achieve independence?
10	How did Singapore tackle its challenges in its early years of independence?

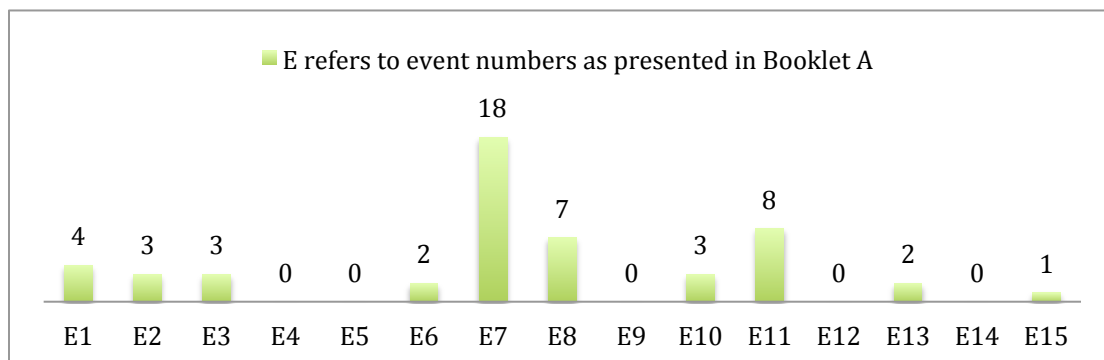
Table 4.3: Overview of key questions in the secondary two textbook (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007)

With the exceptions of chapters 1 and 2, all the key questions for the chapters are posed in such a way that students are only required to explain and account for events that took place in the past in order to answer them. The emphasis on the 'how' encourages students to trace a series of events and demonstrate how they eventually led to a final outcome. Hence, the way the questions have been worded seems to pay very little (if any) attention to the

process of constructing history, such as evaluating evidence or dealing with differing interpretations of an event. Instead, by focusing on the ‘how’, the questions seem to revolve around having students narrate a story of how the things have come to be; allowing the textbook to help in exactly that manner – by presenting a coherent narrative and acting as a gatekeeper of knowledge.

I was also curious as to exactly how ‘powerful’ the Singapore Story is according to the textbook. To find out, I returned to the students’ responses to question 2a. This time, I made a record of which events they thought were least significant in the textbook’s narrative. If Joey’s comments indeed resonated with the rest of the participants, then events that are either not included in the narrative or not part of the main storyline are more likely to be selected by students as least significant in history. My observations are recorded below:

Chart 4.5: Students’ perception of the least significant event in Singapore’s history



True enough, the only event that is not found in the textbook, Singapore’s first Olympic medal (E7 in chart 4.5) ranked as least significant among all the students, by a wide margin. The other two events that ranked as least significant



were the McDonald House Bombing (E11) and the Bukit Ho Swee Fire (E8). Although these two events were included in the textbook, they both played limited roles in it. For example, the McDonald House Bombing was not part of the narrative, and belonged instead to a “Know More About It” feature at the end of chapter 9. While the Bukit Ho Swee Fire may be the only one among these three events that is part of the textbook’s narrative, it is only discussed in two short paragraphs, accompanied with three pictures.

Secondly, Joey’s response helped me to realize that the findings which reveal students’ inclination to understand significance as variable from person to person rather than variable over time, is really not that odd or irreconcilable; especially when viewed in the context of how history education is approached in Singapore. I am certain students think that the significance of the events they chose are not likely to change over time due to the influence of the dominant narrative in school history. Since students are not accustomed to reading about or arbitrating between different interpretations of the past, they are more inclined to accept that the only narrative they are exposed to is the past itself. This would explain why many of them treat the significance of an event as fixed or tied to the event itself. As for the students’ willingness to see significance as variable from person to person, I would argue that they have employed an everyday or common understanding in their justifications since most of them reasoned in a rhetorical manner (e.g. people have different opinions because they are different) that does not take into account the context in which each person ascribes

significance, and each person's tendency to ascribe significance as part of a narrative account.

Based on these observations, I am persuaded that should the approach of history education remain unchanged, it will continue to stunt students' ability to develop a deeper understanding of historical significance – whether it is their ability to explain the criteria they've used to justify significance or whether it is their ability to understand significance as a fixed or variable attribute of an event. As long as a dominant narrative is promoted and students are not given opportunities to encounter and evaluate competing narratives, their understanding of historical significance will remain un-complex and uni-dimensional.

#### **4.4 Brief comments on Cercadillo's framework**

Although this process of data coding and analysis was not easy, Cercadillo's model proved to be immensely helpful for interpreting students' responses. Her coding guidelines were both detailed and clear and they equipped me very well, allowing me to interpret the data without literally being drowned by it. On the one hand, they were specific enough to help me differentiate and interpret students' responses in a meaningful manner and on another, they were sufficiently broad that it could accommodate the diversity in student responses. Aside from enabling me to tackle the data, her typology served as a heuristic tool that helped me to distill and articulate my thoughts on the issues (not just about historical significance, but also related concepts in

history) that the data raised. For this reason, I did not see the need to add to or refine her existing categories, but chose to focus my analyses in this chapter on the lessons that can be taken away from students' responses for teaching significance.

It would be ideal for teacher educators who are keen on developing their conceptual understanding of historical significance and the complexities involved in teaching it to visit Cercadillo's study and familiarize themselves with her typology. I've found that my experience of doing so has not only given me insight into the vocabulary and ways students approach the concept, but also deepened my understanding about how significance is understood within the discipline; since her typology is both deductively and inductively derived (Cercadillo, 2001, p. 123, 125). Both of these are invaluable in informing how I approach the concept and plan lessons for my students, as well as evaluate their responses in the future.

That said, I would not recommend that schools or teachers start to use this framework as a pedagogical guide to teach students how to think about significance in history. This typology was not created for that purpose and if used in that manner, it might serve to reduce how students ascribe or evaluate the significance of an event to a formulaic table of categories and outcomes. In section 2.2.2, I discussed a number of pedagogical frameworks that have been used for this purpose, highlighting the pros and cons of each, and also suggested that for secondary school students, Seixas and Morton's (2012) approach to

teaching historical significance is most ideal, since it is both realistic and comprehensive.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Summary**

I began this research study by discussing what I thought was a significant problem in history education today – that history is taught to students in an authoritative manner where a dominant, usually state-sanctioned narrative is presented to students. This is often done through the use of textbooks, where the process of teaching history revolves around content such as ‘what happened?’, ‘when did it happen?’, ‘why did it happen?’, and ‘what happened after?’. Unfortunately, questions relating to how the past is constructed and why historical accounts are actually more contingent than fixed do not share the same amount of emphasis, and I have argued that this short-changes students’ experience of the discipline.

In chapter 1, I explained why this approach to teaching history in school has been prevalent, attributing it largely to state influence on school history curricula. When teaching the history of a nation, politicians and various stakeholders often advocate teaching a selected national story, as they are compelled by civic or nation-building rationales. Singapore is no exception. As a young, multi-ethnic nation-state of only forty-eight years, history is overtly recognized as a way to socialize young Singaporeans by building a national identity and fostering social cohesion. While I acknowledged that this approach to history education is not wrong in itself, I argued that only teaching history in this

manner will prevent students from developing the competencies necessary to help them arbitrate between competing versions of the past – something that they are bound to encounter outside of school. To address this lack in history education, I looked to the disciplinary approach of teaching history in chapter 2.

Central to the disciplinary approach is that history should be understood as a social construction where accounts of the past are developed in accordance with the standards, procedures and practices established among fellow historians. In such an approach, students are taught that the past and history are separate entities. History refers to historical narratives (including national narratives) that are constantly open to critical inquiry, reinterpretations and revisions as new evidence emerges, by different authors in different contexts. This is distinguished from the past, which refers to everything that has happened, in its entirety. When they recognize that history is neither ‘fixed’ nor ‘given’, they can appreciate the relevance and importance of the discipline in helping them reconcile the alternative interpretations they encounter with the past (Foster, 2013, p. 23). Yet, despite having a strong rationale, the disciplinary approach has had its fair share of critiques, which I also addressed. The one most frequently brought against it is the charge that it threatens the nation-building agenda by challenging the dominance of a singular narrative. I argued that although this seems plausible, it is not necessarily so. When carefully treated, the disciplinary approach can teach students to historicize the past without compromising citizenship aims. This is because the purpose of a disciplinary approach is not to

create skeptics, but to develop an 'openness' in students to consider and evaluate different perspectives and accounts as they encounter them.

Having seen the value and relevance of the disciplinary approach to teaching history, I turned my attention to a specific concept – historical significance. As one of the second-order concepts in the disciplinary approach, I made a case for its importance by explaining how the understanding of the concept is integral to helping students differentiate between the past and history. This is done through helping students understand that any attempt to ascribe significance in history is more than just determining the criteria for doing so. It is also a function of the perspective and narrative that each author places it in, as well as the contexts in which they write. These understandings allow students to come to terms with the contingent nature of how historical significance and by extension, historical accounts are constructed. Yet, in spite of its importance, historical significance is often neglected in history classrooms, probably because teachers face a dilemma when teaching the concept. Should the significance of events be taught as author and context dependent; or should the significance of events be taught as given and fixed in order to serve the political interests of the day? I argued that a way forward in this conundrum would be to artfully negotiate between the two, without compromising the aims of either. However, achieving this is much more easily said than done, especially since the reasons for and impetus to do either are strong. Since no other research study on significance in history has attempted to address this question, I situated my study within this

gap. I wanted to find out how students approached and understood ideas of significance in history, in hope that the findings would be valuable in helping teachers gain knowledge in this area and inform decisions on how they can approach this dilemma of teaching significance in history.

In chapter 3, I made explicit the motivations and method of my research study, establishing my position and inclinations as a history educator in Singapore. I selected a constructivist approach for this research study, mainly because it mirrors my understanding of how knowledge is created in history, and how history as a discipline works. Moreover, studies on students' ideas of historical significance conducted by other researchers in history education have also adopted a constructivist approach. Hence, the decision to do so is a reflection of my intention to actively engage with preceding research, as well as contribute to and extend knowledge in this field. In the remaining part of the chapter, I detailed the methodology for the research study by introducing the research instruments, sampling process, framework for data coding and analysis and finally, the ethical considerations I've made as well as the considerations to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Thereafter, I concluded by discussing the limitations of the study.

The data I gathered from the student participants involved in this study were analyzed in chapter 4. I found that while most participants were able to ascribe significance to events in the past in different ways and think of significance as variable, it did not necessarily mean that they understood the



complexity of significance as a second-order concept. This was evident during a close analysis of their responses where students tended to be guided by their common or 'everyday' understandings, as opposed to a historical understanding. Although it might be argued that this is to be expected since Singaporean students are not taught significance explicitly as a second-order historical thinking concept, I argued that the research study is still important to develop insight into how students reason. Such insights can help teachers understand where their understandings fall short, as well as point toward the capacity students may have in thinking about significance. Such knowledge is valuable in helping history educators determine how the concept is approached and taught in the history classroom.

In the case of Singapore, I asserted that since students demonstrated the ability to discuss significance as a variable property of an event, it is imperative for history educators to develop their understandings accordingly. Rather than allow a singular and authoritative approach to history stunt their capacity to think historically, history education in Singapore should make greater efforts to complicate how students think of the past. In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings for history education in Singapore, in relation to two groups: policy makers and curriculum developers, as well as teachers.

## **5.2 Implications for history education in Singapore**

In chapter two, I suggested that history educators face a dilemma. On one hand, they are subject to external pressures to teach history in a manner that serves the political goals of national identity development and social cohesion, where a dominant narrative is created and promoted for this purpose. On the other hand, there is a desire to teach history in a disciplinary manner which is not simply confined to espousing a pre-drafted, singular version of the past. Rather, they want to help students understand that the discipline is centered upon the inquiry into and search for evidence, accounts and interpretations of the past, so that students may learn the contingent and context dependent nature of the discipline.

Findings from this study strongly suggest that in this dilemma of how to teach history, the balance has tipped in favor of teaching history to serve political goals, and the attempt to teach history in a disciplinary manner has largely been eclipsed, for reasons that have been highlighted throughout this study. Even so, I still maintain that this does not have to be the case – and that although teaching history in the context of a modern nation-state has its own set of demands, it does not always have to be ‘at odds’ with or come at the expense of teaching for disciplinary understanding. As I have argued earlier, since the reasons for the two different approaches are valid in their own right, an artful negotiation between the two is necessary. Yet, I acknowledge that saying so is much easier than getting it done in reality, because there are several groups of actors in

history education, often with differing goals and communities of practice. Although I am unable to explore the implications of these findings on all actors who have a stake in history education, I will discuss the implications for two main groups: teachers, as well for policy and curriculum.

### **5.2.1 Teachers**

Teachers are undoubtedly the key actors in any effort toward change in education. Their competence in, readiness to and investment toward new initiatives will have an impact on the success of its implementation. Unfortunately, the scope of this study does not allow me to comment on exactly how Singapore's history teachers have navigated between the structural limitations (political mandates, compulsory national curriculum, ministry-written textbook etc), assigned professional duties (pressures to produce above-average test scores) and their own educational ideals (whatever they may be) when teaching history. That said, a study conducted by Loh & Jaffar (2013) can help give us some insight into the experiences of teachers 'on the ground'. Their study was done with 60 pre-service trainee teachers, and it sought to reveal the extent of teachers' willingness to engage students in controversial issues in history. This study is relevant for our purposes because it deals with teacher readiness and confidence in teaching alternative accounts to the dominant narrative – something that is very much a part of the disciplinary approach as well as teaching historical significance – because doing so inducts students into the contingent and constructed nature of history.

Loh & Jaffar (2013) concluded that many teachers continue to approach history education as a vehicle for cultural transmission and socialization (p. 175), and have reservations about teaching competing discourses of events in Singapore's history that already have prescribed meanings within the dominant narrative (e.g. Maria Hertogh Riot, Japanese Occupation). Loh & Jaffar attribute this to the fact that all teachers in Singapore are employed by the Ministry of Education, and are thus considered civil servants. They claim that teachers themselves accept this identity and believe that as civil servants, it is their duty to preserve the political status quo. This is evidenced when many of the participants express concerns about getting into trouble with the school, parents or even the state, should they 'expose too much', or fail to teach the "accepted" account of events' in Singapore's history (p. 174). Others shared that they were unwilling to deviate from the prescribed narrative because they were not familiar with alternative accounts of history themselves and were worried that they would not be able to adequately address the topic or questions that may arise from students when teaching them.

Loh & Jaffar argue that teachers' reluctance and lack of expertise is due to the socio-political context of Singaporean society, where the dominant narrative of Singapore's history is preserved and perpetuated in academia. For example, they explained that unlike Britain, the United States and Australia, research on Singapore's political history is hampered by the lack of access to the state archives. Access to the state archives is subject to the approval of the creating or

depositing agency, which they claim gives approval infrequently (p.169). Such restricted access undermines independent research, which is crucial for contending perspectives to emerge. This leads Loh & Jaffar to conclude that teachers are not confident in teaching alternative perspectives because there are not many to begin with. Even for the contending perspectives that are published, they are not always comfortably discussed in public spheres (p.170).

I would like to extend Loh & Jaffar's argument further, to include the domain of mainstream media in Singapore. The Media Development Authority of Singapore constantly attempts to monitor the political opinions of events and issues that are published online, both past and present. This is most clearly encapsulated in Singapore's Minister for Communications and Information, Mr Yacoob Ibrahim's comments in relation to a series of media control regulations implemented in May 2013 (Leyl, 2013). Justifying the rationale for this move, he claimed that

... what we want to do here is to protect the interests of the ordinary Singaporean. As long as they go onto online news sites to read the news, I think it is important for us to ensure that they read the *right* thing. If it is an event, (we must ensure that) it was reported *accurately*.

Mr Yacoob Ibrahim,  
Minister for Communications and Information  
(emphasis mine)

Unsurprisingly, his comments mirror that of Prime Minister Lee's (see pg. 15), in that there can only be one, singular version of the past. Where necessary, measures have been and will be taken to enforce this as much as possible through media censorship. Such a move and the justifications for it are implicit

reminders for all Singaporeans that boundaries exist when discussing politics, history or current affairs. Whether intentionally or otherwise, I would argue that this has and will continue to affect how teachers approach the past in the history classroom. Such restrictions, coupled with the obstacles faced by scholars in academia are debilitating factors that compromise teachers' willingness and confidence in dealing with alternative accounts in history. Hence, it is not hard to understand why the state-sanctioned narrative remains dominant in schools – it is a function of the social and political climate of the country.

That said, although majority of the teachers were hesitant, there were a handful of them that supported the teaching of controversial history, rationalizing their choices along the lines of needing to 'have students understand different sides to the same story', 'develop rational, thinking students', as well as ensure that students 'grow and mature' and become active citizens that can make informed decisions and participate in civic life (p. 174). These responses are heartening because they show that structural and contextual circumstances do not always dictate how teachers respond to and act in their vocations. While external circumstances may no doubt be overbearing, teachers themselves can still actively determine how they choose to teach.

An issue that stands out here is perhaps that the teacher participants falsely dichotomized the endeavors of teaching history for citizenship purposes and teaching history for disciplinary understanding. To them, one must come at the expense of the other, as revealed in their anxieties around 'exposing too

much' and failing to teach the "accepted" account of events' in Singapore's history. For them, exposing students to alternative perspectives and accounts of history is seen as running contrary to citizenship aims in history education. This however, as I've argued in section 2.2.1, is a mistaken presumption, as the aims of teaching history do not have to be in opposition to each other, but can in fact support each other. Loh & Jaffar's (2013) research study shows that only the minority of the teachers is able to reconcile this, and perhaps what is critical here is to help teachers see that these seemingly opposing aims of history education are in fact, complementary (Sears, 2011).

Since teachers harbor such attitudes toward discussing alternative interpretations of the past, efforts to teach historical significance in history are naturally jeopardized because teachers are cautious about introducing students to a alternative accounts for any event in the past. The role of the teacher in the learning process must not be overlooked because the manner in which they treat significance in history can set the tone for how students approach the past. If they unquestioningly accept the dominant narrative and treat the significance of events in the past as fixed, students are likely to follow suit, as seen in section 4.3.3. If we desire for our students to develop the dispositions and skills that come with a disciplinary understanding of history, teachers would need to intentionally model them for students.

This is no small feat because such expectations assume that all teachers necessarily subscribe to the disciplinary approach to teach history and are

sufficiently competent in teaching the concepts that it expounds. I suggest that such buy-in and expertise should never be taken for granted, even in Singapore where lower secondary history teachers are required to implement a nationalized curriculum in schools. Teachers need to have the chance to understand the rationale behind the curriculum they implement, as well as develop their expertise of how history should be taught, particularly in cases where they need to manage changes in approach and pedagogy.

Hence, it is essential that our teachers are given ample opportunities to participate in on-going debates about the aims of history education, the implications of employing different approaches to teaching history, and what approaches would best help to achieve these aims. To ensure its efficacy, these measures need to be taken with pre-service teachers during their teacher education as well as with in-service teachers through providing professional development opportunities throughout their careers. As Wilschut (2012) has argued, the aims of history education are dynamic, and they change overtime according to the circumstances, contexts and needs of the country over time (see chapter 1). Rather than accepting prescribed aims, teachers must constantly engage with such questions, keeping up with developments in the scholarship of history education whilst being mindful of the needs of a nation-state in their historical moment.



### **5.2.2 Policy and curriculum**

Earlier, I mentioned that the Singapore history syllabus review cycles of 2000 and 2007 each featured attempts to teach history in a more disciplinary manner with the introduction of some second-order thinking concepts. Though these syllabuses represented well-meaning intentions to teach history in a less parochial and more critical fashion, they are not without limitations. These limitations include issues around the lack of teacher competency, the misalignment between pedagogical aspirations and assessment realities, as well as the lack of understanding about how Singapore students learn history (see section 2.1.2). Coupled with Singapore's socio-political environment mentioned above, these issues continue to jeopardize the success of a disciplinary approach to teaching history. That said, I recognize that any meaningful change to the curriculum cannot take place overnight – even in a highly centralized education system like Singapore's. Even though practical realities continue to weigh heavily upon advocates for a disciplinary approach to teach history like myself, I have reason to remain optimistic.

In October 2013, the Curriculum Planning & Development Division of the Ministry of Education launched the new lower secondary history syllabus to commence in 2014 for seven years. As a teacher, I attended the launch event, where important information and resources were shared with all the history educators in Singapore. It was heartening to learn that one of the key features of the new syllabus is to advocate disciplinary learning by deepening students'

disciplinary understanding through the explicit teaching of disciplinary knowledge concepts and skills. Second-order concepts in history are now featured more prominently in comparison to the previous two syllabuses. In each of the four units of study across two years, specific historical concepts guide the inquiry question that frames each unit and determines how students approach the past (p. 6-7, Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2013). Such a systematic approach suggests that the Ministry of Education desires to continue on the journey not only to teach students about the past, but to teach students to understand how the discipline works, and how the past is constructed.

To aid with the implementation of the new syllabus and help teachers cope with the demands that come with having to deal with the changes, teaching syllabuses and teaching and learning guides have been developed. These resources aim to provide the theoretical underpinnings on the changes in pedagogy and assessment for teachers to understand why the syllabus is structured the way it is, and how these changes to the syllabus can help to deepen students' disciplinary understanding in the subject. They also include lesson packages that teachers can either readily draw upon or modify further according to the needs of their students. In addition, teachers are also encouraged to attend ministry-sponsored in-service training courses that continue to develop their understanding of the various historical thinking concepts, as well as other practical pedagogical skills that will increase their confidence and competency to teach the new curriculum. The choice to put such

processes in place shows that the Ministry is aware of the challenges that teachers face in school in teaching history, and have put in place these measures to counter them. Such endeavors are certainly very encouraging because it shows that the curriculum planners with the Ministry of Education do not see teachers merely as mindless implementers of a compulsory national curriculum, but as partners working to achieve a desired goal in history education.

An equally important feature in the new syllabus is its attempt to align assessment outcomes with the new pedagogical approach, an issue that has been a fundamental concern of teachers. This is most ostensibly shown in the break away from the emphasis on traditional pen-and-paper assessments in history, where 30% of a students' final grade is now derived from his/her performance in a historical investigation to an inquiry question. This historical investigation is a project task where students go through the process of inquiring into the past with a given question. They gather evidence, analyze and evaluate them in the light of the question, form conclusions and present their findings. What is remarkable about this is that students are not only graded on the outcome of their investigation, but on the process of it as well, through keeping an investigation log that documents their experiences and reflections as they go about investigating and developing a response to the question. Such a bold change in an education system where assessment practices are known to drive classroom practice sends a distinct and clear message about the new emphasis

and importance of 'doing history'. I am optimistic that this move may well lead to the desired changes in pedagogical practice. Such curriculum reform may well herald new perspectives in both teachers' and students' perception of what history is about, moving it away from the pre-conceived notions that it is a 'boring' subject packed with facts about events, date and people to be mastered, memorized and regurgitated by students in examinations (Afandi & Baildon, 2010); to one where students are well engaged in the craft of a historian – which include the gathering of evidence, its evaluation and the forming of conclusions in response to questions posed about the past.

All of these different provisions demonstrate that at the level of curriculum policy, the Ministry of Education has enacted a series of changes that help teachers manage the implementation of a new syllabus that intentionally promotes disciplinary understanding in students. Crucial aspects that can influence the success of its implementation such as teacher training and resource provision have been catered for. The only critique I have of these efforts is that while all the practical aspects have been tended to, there is still an issue that has yet to be addressed. It pertains to teachers' concerns about what is acceptable and permissible when discussing alternative accounts to the dominant narrative. This is fundamental because Loh & Jaffar's study (2013) suggests that there is a substantial degree of self-censorship among teachers when it comes to dealing with Singapore's history, for reasons that I've explained in the previous section. My concern is that leaving this issue unaddressed would

compromise the good efforts that have already been invested to promote the disciplinary approach in the 2014 syllabus. Even though it seems obvious that it is crucial to address concerns relating to socio-political climate, these have not been addressed with the same rigor as other issues have.

Whatever the reasons may be for this, I maintain that for Singapore to make a breakthrough in history education and attain the goals of developing students' disciplinary understanding and reasoning skills as purported in the new syllabus, it is imperative to engage the teachers in an open and transparent discussion about the aims of history education, and how they can best be enacted in the present context through the given curriculum. The benefits of such an engagement are multifold. At the most basic level, such discussions can help teachers deal with immediate issues such as navigating the tricky business of dealing with alternative accounts in history. At a deeper, more conceptual level, such open discussions give teachers the opportunity to constantly align their choice of classroom practices and pedagogy with the aims of history education. This can generate buy-in for the new syllabus, which plays an integral role in determining how successfully it is implemented. It also creates a community of practice among teachers to assess the effectiveness of the pedagogies they employ.

Having discussed the broader issues surrounding the implications of a disciplinary approach in Singapore, I narrow my discussion in the following paragraphs to focus on the implications of my study on students' understanding

of historical significance in relation to the new syllabus. It is indeed heartening to find that in this new syllabus, historical significance is taught explicitly. The scope and sequence chart<sup>11</sup> clearly states that the objectives of teaching historical significance at this level are to help students to understand that:

- historians pay attention to certain events or personalities in the past that is significant; and
- to be considered significant, historical phenomena must matter in a way that has had deep consequences or affected people over an extended period of time. (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2013, p.34-35)

These objectives are achieved by having students learn through inquiry tasks. For example, the concept of historical significance now frames the inquiry question in chapter 7, which reads: “What did independence mean for Singapore?”. It is also the concept that drives the historical investigation task in unit 4 which reads: “What should be remembered in Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s?”. The manner in which significance is employed in the design of chapter inquiries and unit historical investigations demonstrates visibly the extent of the importance of the concept vis-à-vis content knowledge in history.

The findings from this study raise two pertinent issues. Firstly, the two stated objectives for teaching significance at this stage do not aim to teach

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<sup>11</sup> The scope and sequence chart is component of the teaching and learning guide for teachers. It depicts an overview of the syllabus, and draws connections between all its component parts (eg. content, concepts, skills, values and attitude outcomes).

students to understand the context- and author- dependent nature of significance. This, coupled with the distinctly political overture in both questions could mean that there may still be a tendency to imbue students with a singular interpretation of the significance of Singapore's independence or of certain figures or events. This of course, depends primarily on how the students are taught, and whether alternative accounts to the dominant narrative are intentionally introduced. Perhaps, it would be ideal to incorporate a third objective that addresses the contingent nature of significance, since this study has shown that when students fail to grasp the contingent nature of significance, they are prone to problematic ideas such as presentism and determinism. Given that majority of the students do not have the opportunity to pursue history after secondary 2, curriculum planners should explore ways to help students develop a fuller understanding of the concept of significance – that which includes its interpretative nature. Doing so would ensure that students are not given much chance to allow their common or everyday understandings of significance to take over in their treatment of the past, so that they may be better poised for the complexities of life in a democratic setting.

Secondly, this increased prominence and emphasis on second-order concepts like significance necessarily means that curriculum designers had to and will continue to have to make decisions about what to teach regarding each concept, how to teach it, and how to assess them at the various levels. For instance, the decision was made to present significance as having two key

objectives at the lower secondary level (see paragraph above), based on a progression chart for second-order concepts (pp. 21-23). The chart features desired competencies for each concept, divided into two main columns, one for lower secondary students, and one for upper secondary students. While I have no doubt that this chart is thoughtfully constructed since its contents are based on the United Kingdom's Schools History Project Year 9 Teachers' Resource Book (Wilson, Banham & Luff, 2009) as well as the consultation with a local academic in history education, Dr. Suhaimi Afandi, it should be noted that they are not based on empirical studies with Singapore students themselves. I would like to propose that research studies such as this one on students' ideas of historical significance could help to inform curriculum designers as they determine progression levels and stratify the complexity of historical knowledge for the purposes of teaching and learning. Although the findings from this research study are not representative of all secondary 2 students in Singapore, it still displays a range of responses from different ends of the ability spectrum, which can be helpful when designing a national curriculum. When consulted together with other relevant research studies, fewer assumptions are made about what students already or do not already know, and more questions can be asked about how to correct misconceptions or deepen their understanding; all of which can lead to better curriculum design.



### **5.3 Further research**

This leads me to the final section of my thesis, where I make suggestions regarding areas of further research that can extend our understanding of history education beyond what this thesis has attempted to accomplish. My suggestions are certainly not exhaustive, and I will readily admit that they are skewed toward my experiences, inclinations and interests as an individual. I have divided them into two broad categories.

#### **5.3.1 Historical significance as a second-order concept**

The first category deals with what my research questions were specifically concerned with – the concept of historical significance and how students understand it. My research was carried out at the end of the 2007 syllabus cycle in 2013. Although the scale and nature of my research study did not allow me to generalize my findings, it still served to demonstrate the range of possible responses in secondary two students who had completed the compulsory 2007 national history curriculum. As further research, perhaps this study can be improved where necessary, and replicated, to see how secondary two students who have completed the 2014 national history curriculum will fare. Such a study can provide insights into how much difference the new curriculum makes on students' understanding of significance in history.

Apart from extending the study, this study can also be made more complex by delving deeper into questions that deal specifically with why students hold the understandings they do about what is significant in history and why. As

explained in section 3.5, it was a conscious decision to avoid accounting for the extent of the impact that social or political factors (e.g. the role of identity, race, religion, political freedom) may have on students' ideas of significance. However, as the analysis of my findings showed in chapters 4 and 5, it is hard to extricate an analysis of students' understanding from their socio-political circumstances. Perhaps this study can be more encompassing and informative if these factors are actively taken into account in the design of the research study for a Singapore study, in the manner that Barton & Levstik (1998, 2004) as well as Epstein (2009) have done.

### **5.3.2 Disciplinary approach to history**

As mentioned earlier, not much research has been done on students' understanding of various second-order concepts in the disciplinary approach. Our commitment to the disciplinary approach to teaching history would be greatly assisted by more empirical research on students' preconceptions of the various concepts. Such research can reveal any impediments to their learning, at the structural or pedagogical level. I should add that research should not be confined within an academic context, but also include smaller-scale action research projects from teachers who teach the concepts on a daily basis. This would generate engagement, interest and exchange among teachers about their experiences. When shared in professional learning circles, they can bring about opportunities for history educators to provide support for each other through curricular changes as well to improve their craft.

On a more macro level, more research can definitely be accomplished that deals with the disciplinary approach to history in a context like Singapore. While much has been written to advocate for the disciplinary approach in history teaching in Singapore, not much has been written about teachers' and students' perceptions of such an approach, making it worthy of further exploration. For example, in the opening chapter of "The challenge of rethinking history education", Bruce VanSledright (2011) described a study he conducted that compared students' responses to and performance on a unit of American history taught by two teachers who employed different approaches when teaching it – one through a traditional, didactic approach and the other through a disciplinary approach. The results of his study formed the basis of his book, and I am convinced that a similar study conducted in the context of Singapore can help to shed light on the extent of its efficacy in the Singapore context, and what this means for history education in Singapore.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that I am not alone in believing in and advocating for the disciplinary approach to teaching history in the context of a modern nation-state. Wineburg (2007) recognizes that disciplinary history, with its own characteristic forms of inquiry, means of investigation and forms of argument may be unnatural and even unwelcome because it has the capacity to undo or defy versions of history that have been traditionally revered and celebrated. Yet, he argues that failure to use a disciplinary approach would leave us susceptible to emotional appeals, incendiary language and quotations or

accounts from the past that have been ripped out of context. It is when we are faced with such dilemmas that he argues that it is not a matter of abandoning one in favor of another; but that we need both approaches to history – the approach that privileges that which is revered as well as the approach that privileges that which is critical – in order to lead connected, thoughtful and intellectually rigorous lives. In his words, it is “knowing how and when to alternate among the different ways of engaging the past that allows us to participate in the full range of human experience” (p. 7). What is absolutely compelling about Wineburg’s argument is that he does not think that these two ways of approaching the past are oppositional – but rather that both are necessary.

I am convinced that history education in Singapore is at the cusp of change. The success of upcoming efforts to nurture disciplinary and conceptual understanding in history in a manner that has not been done before will hinge on the history teaching fraternity’s ability to address the fundamental issue about the aims and purposes of history education in Singapore.

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*Teaching History*, 129, 6-11.

<b>Sets of possible criteria with which to judge significance</b>	
<p><b>Geoffrey Partington (1980)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance</li> <li>• Profundity</li> <li>• Quantity</li> <li>• Durability</li> <li>• Relevance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Robert Phillips' 'GREAT' (2002)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groundbreaking</li> <li>• Remembered by all</li> <li>• Events that were far-reaching</li> <li>• Affected the future</li> <li>• Terrifying</li> </ul>
<p><b>Christine Counsell's 5 'Rs' (2004)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remarkable</li> <li>• Remembered</li> <li>• Resonant</li> <li>• Resulting in change</li> <li>• Revealing</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ian Dawson (2003)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changed events at the time they lived</li> <li>• Improved / Made lots of lives worse</li> <li>• Changed peoples' ideas</li> <li>• Long-lasting impact on their country or world</li> <li>• Really good / bad example to people of how to live</li> </ul>
<p><b>Denos and Case (2006)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prominence at the time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Immediate recognition</li> <li>- Duration</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Consequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Magnitude of impact</li> <li>- Scope of impact</li> <li>- Lasting nature of impact</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Subsequent profile <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Remembered</li> <li>- Revealing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

**List of schools ranked according to  
Secondary School Admission Scores**

Schools highlighted in green belong to Grouping Unit 1

Schools highlighted in orange belong to Grouping Unit 2

Schools highlighted in pink belong to Grouping Unit 3

School	2013 Intake
NANYANG GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL	265
RAFFLES GIRLS' SCHOOL (SECONDARY)	263
RAFFLES INSTITUTION	263
HWA CHONG INSTITUTION	261
NATIONAL JUNIOR COLLEGE	259
DUNMAN HIGH SCHOOL	256
RIVER VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	256
CHIJ ST. NICHOLAS GIRLS' SCHOOL	253
METHODIST GIRLS' SCHOOL (SECONDARY)	252
CEDAR GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOL	251
SINGAPORE CHINESE GIRLS' SCHOOL	251
TEMASEK JUNIOR COLLEGE	251
ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL (INDEPENDENT)	249
CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL	249
ANDERSON SECONDARY SCHOOL	246
BUKIT PANJANG GOVT. HIGH SCHOOL	246
VICTORIA SCHOOL	246
NAN HUA HIGH SCHOOL	245
ST. JOSEPH'S INSTITUTION	245
CRESCENT GIRLS' SCHOOL	244
CHIJ SECONDARY (TOA PAYOH)	243
ANGLICAN HIGH SCHOOL	242
ST. MARGARET'S SECONDARY SCHOOL	241
NAN CHIAU HIGH SCHOOL	240
CHUNG CHENG HIGH SCHOOL (MAIN)	239
FAIRFIELD METHODIST SCHOOL (SECONDARY)	239
COMMONWEALTH SECONDARY SCHOOL	238
SWISS COTTAGE SECONDARY SCHOOL	237

School	2013 Intake
TANJONG KATONG GIRLS' SCHOOL	236
NGEE ANN SECONDARY SCHOOL	235
CHUNG CHENG HIGH SCHOOL (YISHUN)	234
MARIS STELLA HIGH SCHOOL	234
PAYA LEBAR METHODIST GIRLS' SCHOOL (SECONDARY)	234
ST. ANDREW'S SECONDARY SCHOOL	234
TANJONG KATONG SECONDARY SCHOOL	234
XINMIN SECONDARY SCHOOL	234
YISHUN TOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL	234
ZHONGHUA SECONDARY SCHOOL	233
KRANJI SECONDARY SCHOOL	232
TEMASEK SECONDARY SCHOOL	232
CLEMENTI TOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL	231
PRESBYTERIAN HIGH SCHOOL	231
DUNMAN SECONDARY SCHOOL	230
FUHUA SECONDARY SCHOOL	230
RIVERSIDE SECONDARY SCHOOL	230
ST. HILDA'S SECONDARY SCHOOL	230
CHIJ ST. JOSEPH'S CONVENT	229
CHIJ ST. THERESA'S CONVENT	229
ST. ANTHONY'S CANOSSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL	229
JURONG SECONDARY SCHOOL	228
ANG MO KIO SECONDARY SCHOOL	227
KUO CHUAN PRESBYTERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL	227
BOWEN SECONDARY SCHOOL	226
CHIJ KATONG CONVENT	226
HAI SING CATHOLIC SCHOOL	226
GAN ENG SENG SCHOOL	225
BUKIT BATOK SECONDARY SCHOOL	224
EVERGREEN SECONDARY SCHOOL	224
ST. PATRICK'S SCHOOL	224
HOLY INNOCENTS' HIGH SCHOOL	223
PASIR RIS SECONDARY SCHOOL	223
HUA YI SECONDARY SCHOOL	222
MAYFLOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL	221
UNITY SECONDARY SCHOOL	221



School	2013 Intake
WEST SPRING SECONDARY SCHOOL	221
GEYLANG METHODIST SCHOOL (SECONDARY)	220
PASIR RIS CREST SECONDARY SCHOOL	220
ST. GABRIEL'S SECONDARY SCHOOL	220
BEDOK VIEW SECONDARY SCHOOL	219
EDGEFIELD SECONDARY SCHOOL	219
CHUA CHU KANG SECONDARY SCHOOL	218
AHMAD IBRAHIM SECONDARY SCHOOL	217
WOODLANDS RING SECONDARY SCHOOL	217
BEATTY SECONDARY SCHOOL	216
COMPASSVALE SECONDARY SCHOOL	216
YUAN CHING SECONDARY SCHOOL	216
BEDOK SOUTH SECONDARY SCHOOL	215
DEYI SECONDARY SCHOOL	214
QUEENSWAY SECONDARY SCHOOL	214
ZHENGHUA SECONDARY SCHOOL	214
CORAL SECONDARY SCHOOL	213
PEIRCE SECONDARY SCHOOL	212
WOODGROVE SECONDARY SCHOOL	212
EAST SPRING SECONDARY SCHOOL	211
ORCHID PARK SECONDARY SCHOOL	211
BEDOK GREEN SECONDARY SCHOOL	210
NORTH VISTA SECONDARY SCHOOL	210
WESTWOOD SECONDARY SCHOOL	210
GREENRIDGE SECONDARY SCHOOL	208
JURONGVILLE SECONDARY SCHOOL	207
MONTFORT SECONDARY SCHOOL	207
TAMPINES SECONDARY SCHOOL	207
BUKIT VIEW SECONDARY SCHOOL	205
DAMAI SECONDARY SCHOOL	205
DUNEARN SECONDARY SCHOOL	205
MANJUSRI SECONDARY SCHOOL	205
PEI HWA SECONDARY SCHOOL	205
YISHUN SECONDARY SCHOOL	204
ADMIRALTY SECONDARY SCHOOL	203
HOUGANG SECONDARY SCHOOL	203
JUNYUAN SECONDARY SCHOOL	203
NAVAL BASE SECONDARY SCHOOL	203

School	2013 Intake
CHRIST CHURCH SECONDARY SCHOOL	202
CANBERRA SECONDARY SCHOOL	201
HILLGROVE SECONDARY SCHOOL	201
NEW TOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL	201
QUEENSTOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL	200
ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL (BARKER ROAD)	198
JURONG WEST SECONDARY SCHOOL	198
GUANGYANG SECONDARY SCHOOL	197
KENT RIDGE SECONDARY SCHOOL	197
SENG KANG SECONDARY SCHOOL	197
GREENVIEW SECONDARY SCHOOL	196
GREENDALE SECONDARY SCHOOL	194
WOODLANDS SECONDARY SCHOOL	194
CHESTNUT DRIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL	193
TECK WHYE SECONDARY SCHOOL	193
REGENT SECONDARY SCHOOL	192
BOON LAY SECONDARY SCHOOL	189
PUNGGOL SECONDARY SCHOOL	189
YIO CHU KANG SECONDARY SCHOOL	189
ASSUMPTION ENGLISH SCHOOL	188
BALESTIER HILL SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BARTLEY SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BEDOK NORTH SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BEDOK TOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BENDEMEER SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BISHAN PARK SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BROADRICK SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
BUKIT MERAH SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
CHANGKAT CHANGI SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
CHONG BOON SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
CLEMENTI WOODS SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
EAST VIEW SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
FAJAR SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
FIRST TOA PAYOH SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
FUCHUN SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
HENDERSON SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
HONG KAH SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
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MACPHERSON SECONDARY SCHOOL	188
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Ranking information taken from: Ace Tutors (2012), Secondary school ranking based on PSLE 2012, <http://www.acetutors.com.sg/Secondary-School-Ranking-2012-Based-On-PSLE-Intake>, retrieved on 20/07/2013.

## Survey Questionnaire

Dear student,

Thank you for participating in this research study. Your participation in this study will help us understand how students think about history. Results from this study will help us to improve how history is taught.

The questionnaire should take you no more than 45 minutes to complete.

All information gathered through this questionnaire will be treated with strictest confidentiality.

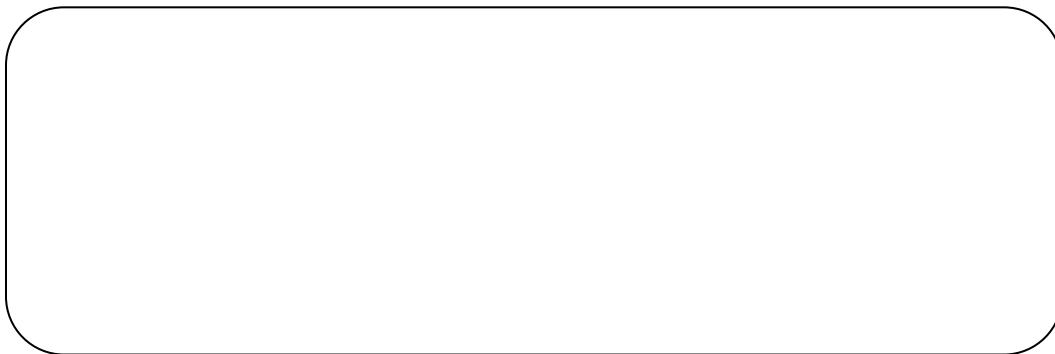
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**Qn 1a:** From your knowledge of Singapore's history, select **THREE** events that you think are most significant and explain why you chose them.

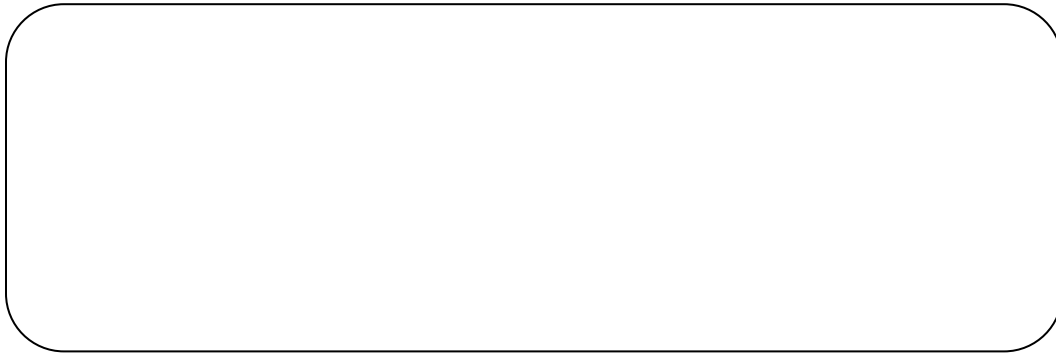
(**Booklet A** has been provided for your easy reference. You can select events listed there or select other events from your knowledge.)

### THREE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN SINGAPORE'S HISTORY


Event: \_\_\_\_\_



Event: \_\_\_\_\_



Event: \_\_\_\_\_

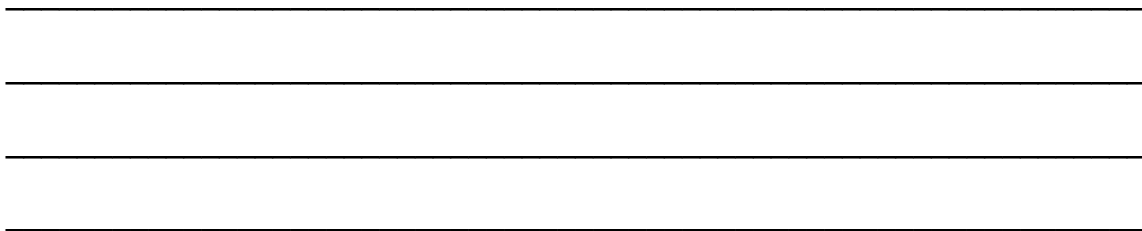


**Qn 1b:** Look back to the first event you listed in Qn 1a. Do you think you think the significance of this event in Singapore's history can change over time?

☐ Yes

☐ No

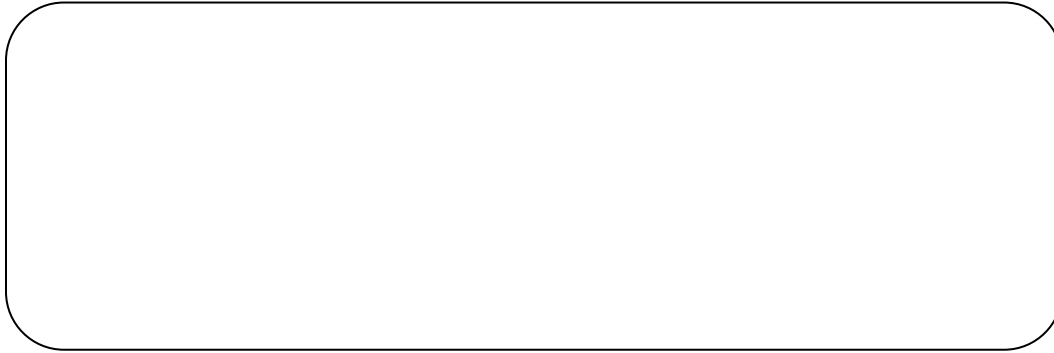
Explain why.



**Qn 2a:** From your knowledge of Singapore's history, select **ONE** event you think is least significant. List the event below and explain why you think it is least significant.

(**Booklet A** has been provided for your easy reference. You can select events listed there or select other events from your knowledge.)

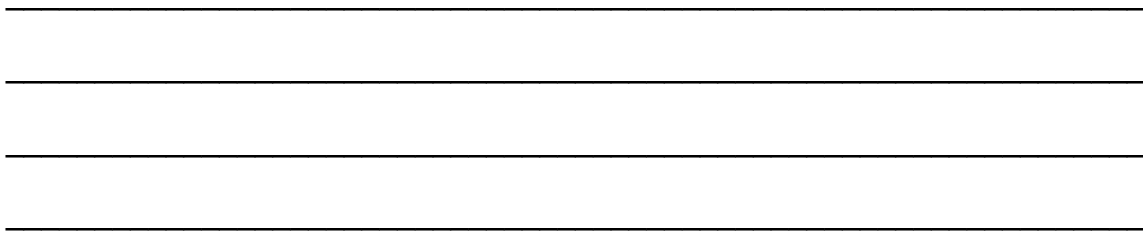
Event: \_\_\_\_\_



**Qn 2b:** Do you think most other people would agree with your choice in question 2a?

☐ Yes                      ☐ No                      ☐ Depends

Explain why.



**Qn 2c:** If someone wanted to argue that the event you selected as least significant is really the most significant, how might they do so?



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**Qn 2d:** Do you think their reasons are valid?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Explain why.

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**Qn 3:** Is there any event that is not on the list in Booklet A that you think is very significant in Singapore's history?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered 'Yes', what is it and why do you think it is significant?

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**Qn 4:** In general, what do you think makes things significant in history?

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**Qn 5:** The following question is about the early history of Singapore. Two different historians have written about it – read extracts from their accounts below.

**Account from Historian A**

While surveying neighboring islands for a suitable place for a British trading post in 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles recognized the potential of the swamp covered island known as Temasek. He helped negotiate a treaty with the local rulers and founded Singapore as a trading station. Soon, the island's policy of free trade under the British attracted merchants from many other parts of the world.

**a:** What do you think Historian A finds significant in the early history of Singapore?

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**Account from Historian B**

Archaeological evidence has been discovered that proves Singapore was a prosperous trading settlement several hundred years before Raffles founded Singapore in 1819. Ceramics and pottery from China, Indian glass beads, iron ornaments and old copper coins found in other parts of Southeast Asia have been found along and around the Singapore River and on Fort Canning Hill.

**b:** What does Historian B find significant in the early history of Singapore?

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**Qn 5c:** Do you think the two historians agree about what is significant in the early history of Singapore?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Explain why.

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**End**

**Thank you for your time and participation!**

**Interview Protocol**

Researcher:

Good morning / afternoon! Thank you for participating in this small-group interview. My name is Delia and I am a teacher in the Ministry of Education who is currently pursuing a Masters degree. Feel free to call me Delia or Ms. Foo. Through this interview, I hope to understand better how students like you understand the concept of significance in history.

The contents of this interview will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Should you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions posed to you at any point, you can choose not to answer them. This interview should not take more than 45 minutes.

**Qn 1:**

Share with the group the three events that you have chosen as most significant in Singapore's history.

(The researcher will tailor the following questions in accordance to students' responses.)

- a. Some of you think that (name of event) was significant. Can you explain why?
- b. Some of you did not think that (name of event) was significant. Can you explain why?
- c. Do you think the significance of (name of event) can change over time (e.g. become more or less significant)? Why or why not?
- d. Each of you made named different events as most significant in history. Why do you think different people choose different events as most significant in history?

**Qn 2:**

- a. In general, what do you think makes things significant in history?

- b. (If the students provide different responses to Qn 2a) Each of you gave different reasons for what makes things significant in history. Why do people think differently about what makes things significant in history?

**Qn 3:**

- a. Do you think that there are (insert prominent event not previously discussed) that are definitely significant, despite what people think?
- b. If yes, give an example.
- c. Explain why you think so.
- d. Who determines the significance of this event? Does it make a difference?

**Qn 4:**

- e. Do you think that there are some events that are definitely insignificant, despite what people think?
- f. If yes, give an example.
- g. Explain why you think so.

**End**

**Thank you for your time and participation!**

## **Booklet A**

### **15 events in Singapore's history**

#### **A summary:**

1. Arrival of the British in Singapore, 1819
2. Establishment of the Chinese Protectorate, 1877
3. Surrender of Singapore to the Japanese, 1942
4. End of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, 1945
5. Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950
6. Hock Lee Bus Riots, 1955
7. Singapore's first Olympic medal, 1960
8. Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 1961
9. Merger with Malaya, 1963
10. Racial Riots, 1964
11. McDonald House Bombing, 1965
12. Separation from Malaya and Independence, 1965
13. National Service Amendment Bill, 1967
14. Singapore enters the United Nations (UN) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 1965 and 1967
15. Opening of the first Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Line, 1987

### **1. Arrival of the British in Singapore, 1819**

The British arrived in Singapore when Sir Stamford Raffles landed there on January 1819. After some discussion with the Temenggong regarding local politics, Raffles decided to recognize Tengku Hussein instead of his younger brother, Tengku Abdul Rahman as the rightful Sultan. The British then sought Sultan Hussein's permission to start a trading settlement in Singapore. Sultan Hussein agreed to Raffles' terms and the British flag was planted on Singapore shores.

### **2. Establishment of the Chinese Protectorate, 1877**

The Chinese Protectorate was established in the Straits Settlements in 1877 to administer to the needs of the Chinese community. Its main functions include the establishment of a pool of civil servants conversant in the Chinese language, administering newly-arrived coolie labourers (known as sinkeh), regulating secret societies, rescuing female victims of prostitution, and the containment of venereal diseases.

### **3. Surrender of Singapore to the Japanese, 1942**

A week after the Japanese landed in Singapore, they had managed to capture several key areas and established the Ford Factory in Bukit Timah as its headquarters. In the final conference with his commandants, Lieutenant-General Percival assessed that launching a counter-attack would result in more deaths and problems. On 15 February 1942, the British surrendered to the Japanese on unconditional terms.

### **4. End of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, 1945**

Shortly after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered Singapore to the British. British troops first returned to Singapore on 5 September; and on 12 September, a Surrender Ceremony took place in the Municipal Building (now City Hall). Large crowds gathered and cheered the return of the British, officially marking the end of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia.

### **5. Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950**

The Maria Hertogh Riots were sparked by the controversial battle for the custody of Maria Hertogh. During the Japanese Occupation, Maria's biological parents gave Maria to be raised by a Malay woman, Che Aminah. She was given the name, Nadra. After the war, they tried to regain custody of Maria. When Maria was returned to Aminah during a period of appeal, she married a local Malay teacher. However, the British

court refused to recognize Maria's marriage and ruled that she be returned to her biological parents. This angered the local Muslim community who felt that Muslim laws were not respected, leading to riots which took place over a period of three days and saw at least 18 people killed and 173 people injured.

#### **6. Hock Lee Bus Riots, 1955**

In April 1955, workers belonging to the Singapore Bus Workers Union served a strike notice to Hock Lee Bus Company demanding better pay and working conditions. In response, Hock Lee Bus dismissed several workers. The workers countered this by protesting at the gates of the company and preventing buses from leaving. When negotiations between the company and the protestors failed, the police were ordered to take all necessary action to clear the lines of protest. The protest turned into a violent riot where four people were killed and 15 people were injured.

#### **7. Singapore's first Olympic medal, 1960**

Singapore won her first Olympic medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics. Tan Howe Liang, a weightlifter, beat 33 other competitors and clinched the silver medal for weightlifting in the light-weight category. Subsequently, Singapore did not win any medals at the Olympics for 48 years until 2008.

#### **8. Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 1961**

On 25 May 1961, the biggest ever fire in the history of Singapore broke out in Bukit Ho Swee, a squatter settlement. Although the cause of the fire is unknown, it spread very quickly due to the notoriously dangerous living conditions of the settlement. The Bukit Ho Swee fire left 16,000 people homeless, injured 54 people and killed 4 others. The event cemented the government's resolve to raise the quality of housing for its citizens and to prevent the use of unauthorized structures for constructing houses.

#### **9. Merger with Malaya, 1963**

Singapore's merger with Malaya took place on 16 Sept 1963 following a referendum where 71% of the people in Singapore voted in favor a merger. This event marked the formation of Malaysia, which consisted of the 11 states of Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore. The basis for merger was that Singapore and Malaysia would have a common market, which would increase trade and create jobs. With the merger, Singapore was no longer a colony of Britain.

## **10. The MacDonald House Bombing, 1965**

When Malaysia was formed, Indonesia refused to recognize it, arguing that both Sabah and Sarawak should join Indonesia instead. Indonesia launched a policy of *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) that set to intimidate and disrupt life throughout Malaysia. The MacDonald House bombing was the most serious of 36 bomb explosions in Singapore where 3 people were killed and 33 others injured.

## **11. Racial Riots, 1964**

Following Singapore's merger with Malaya, tensions began to build between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore. Some Malays believed that the policies of the Chinese-dominated Peoples Action Party in Singapore disadvantaged the Malays and harbored deep resentment against them. Two riots broke out in July and Aug 1964 when leaving 36 people dead and 563 injured. These riots were the worst and most prolonged in Singapore's post-war history.

## **12. Separation from Malaya and Independence, 1965**

Singapore's merger with Malaysia was riddled with much difficulty. The benefits of the common market did not take place as anticipated and there seemed to be more competition instead. A major source of disagreement between Singapore and the central government in Kuala Lumpur revolved around the inability to agree on the rights of the Malays. Singapore believed in the equal treatment of all races while the central government in Kuala Lumpur believed in granting the Malays special rights. Both Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew agreed that it was best for Singapore to leave Malaysia. On 9 August 1965, Singapore was officially separated from Malaysia and gained her independence.

## **13. The National Service Amendment Bill, 1967**

After gaining independence from Malaysia, Singapore's leaders thought it necessary to build a strong defense force to ensure peace and stability. They believed that stability is essential to attract foreign investors and develop the Singapore economy. In March 1967, The National Service Amendment Bill was passed that required all 18-year old Singaporean male citizens who were medically fit to serve 2 and a half years of mandatory national service.

**14. Singapore enters the United Nations (UN) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**

Shortly following independence, Singapore was recognized within the global community as a new independent nation and became a member of the UN in September 1965. Singapore also was recognized as a new independent nation among its neighbors when it became one of the founding members of ASEAN alongside Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand.

**15. Opening of the first Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Line, 1987**

The MRT system is an indispensable mode of transport in present-day Singapore with an average of 2 million people using the network daily. The MRT was first planned for in 1967 when Singapore's leaders thought it necessary to have a rail transport system to support Singapore's growing infrastructure and economy. 1987 saw the opening of the first 14 stations, majority of which lay on the North-South line, where the population was most dense at that time.