

Can Individuality Be Taught? The Paradox of Self-Identity and Autonomy in a Pragmatic Society

Venus Ke Xin Pei, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Xin Er Lin, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Abstract

Can individuality be taught? This paper explores the paradoxical relationship between Singapore's holistic education model and the culture industry's impact on Singapore in today's digital age. Education in Singapore has evolved from a largely pragmatic curriculum in the nation building years to a more holistic framework in recent years. Even though this is the case, does holistic education necessarily mean a less pragmatic one? This holistic approach encompasses the nurturing of character, creativity, and critical thinking skills alongside strong academic foundations. However, how much of our holistic education system focuses on cultivating a strong sense of self and identity among students? This paper investigates how these seemingly contrasting forces— a holistic education system and a commercially-driven pragmatic society and the pervasive influence of the digital age – coexist in Singapore and the potential impact this has on young minds. Rigid definitions of success limit individuals' critical thinking skills, binding them to conform to uniformity, stunting creativity in the long run. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing the current educational landscape. It advocates strategies that promote individual autonomy in critical thinking and foster a sense of ownership in students' learning journey, thereby creating dynamic learning spaces where creativity flourishes.

Keywords: Creativity, Individuality, Pragmatism, Holistic Development, Digital Age

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Introduction

Individuality and pragmatism have been falsely pitted against one another as antonyms. The idea that creativity cannot exist in the realm of pragmatism is a logical fallacy. Yet, when one thinks of Singapore's education system, some may think of pragmatism and academic achievement rather than a knack for promoting deeply introspecting students who are creative and have a strong sense of self (Hardy et al., 2021). This is unsurprising given that Singapore is ultimately a collectivist society. Nonetheless, the Singapore education system has introduced a system of holistic education to respond to the needs and demands of the 21st century (Lee & Low, 2013). Given that digitisation is at the forefront of our globalised world, it is of utmost salience that Singapore's education system remains relevant and rigorous in meeting the demands and needs of the global economy. Given that human capital is the most lucrative resource that supports our economy (Lee & Low, 2013), the value of individuality, thus takes a backseat in relation to developing a holistic education system in comparison to the produced value generated by students when they eventually enter the workforce.

Contextualising Holistic Education in Singapore

While there are studies which focus on the holistic learning and educational policies of Singapore, they largely focus on the costs of education training and the upgrading of skills such that these skills can later be monetised rather than focusing on the personal development of each student, which helps to shape one's sense of self, identity and autonomy. The idea of pragmatism is deeply ingrained in the way policies are crafted in Singapore, education is no different. Schleicher (2013) posits that "education policy needs to respond by improving the quality of learning outcomes, putting the premium on skills-oriented learning throughout life instead of qualifications-focused education upfront. This is about fostering demand-sensitive and relevant learning." and "However, skills development will be far more effective if the world of learning and the world of work are linked." (p. 46). These insights show an inherently pragmatic way of viewing the design of educational policy. This can be problematic to the personal growth of individuals as they are taught to hit targets set for them. The shift from academic focus to skill-based educational policies can help to shape students into better workers, however, true introspection may not be given enough room in the equation. This is because it makes more sense for the curriculum to be standardised such that we meet the country's need to produce a more economy and work oriented educated populace, after all, "Singapore is a small country with limited resources. Our people are our most important resource, and we invest heavily in building up our human capital in order to secure Singapore's future" (Lee & Low, 2013).

In fact, the framework of holistic education is largely based on skill rather than the promotion of discovering oneself. The need for measurable outcomes is often prioritised (Hardy et al., 2021). Another evidence of holistic education being based on monetizable skills rather than focusing on individualism is how the holistic education framework is created based on 21st Century Competencies which are essentially a list of skills a student is expected to develop alongside five or more academic subjects at the secondary level. Lee and Low (2013) have written that "An in-depth review of 21st century competencies (21CC) became topical when governments began to map education outcomes to workforce skills and competencies.". It is notable that many of these skills and competencies are directly related to the development of an individual and by extension, their self-identity.

The Supposed Paradox of Holistic Education and Pragmatism

Holistic education, with its emphasis on personal growth, critical thinking, and well-rounded development, often juxtaposes the commercial culture industry, which is driven by profit maximisation, consumerism, and standardised content. In today's digital age, this paradox becomes even more pronounced due to the pervasive influence of social media, advertising, and digital entertainment on young minds. Yet, Singapore's holistic education framework weaves in the skills required of students. Ng (2017) posits that Singapore, a nation of constant evolution, upholds certain core values to anchor its people amidst rapid change. While deeply committed to a meritocratic system, the country is also striving to support students who face challenges in achieving academic success within its highly competitive environment. As discussed earlier, personal growth, critical thinking and well-rounded development are only important to the extent that it makes them viable human capital and assets in the country's economy. Although this version of holistic education helps to promote the development of in-demand skills among students, it may not give them space necessary to explore their individuality beyond the confines of a future career path. Hung and Johannis (2023) assert that "learning cannot be divorced from self-identity", which would entail that regardless of what subjects and activities undertaken by students in the process of learning, one's identity would be shaped. Yet, if the programmes in school are largely standardised and curriculum is mostly designed with students as human capital in mind, the process of meaning-making would be confined to how one can monetise the skills they have picked up or become a second thought after the need to excel academically. To address this tension, it is essential to reconsider the role of critical thinking and creativity within Singapore's holistic education framework and how it shapes an individual's mindset and sense of self. While these skills are undoubtedly valuable for the workforce, they can also empower students to challenge societal norms, question dominant narratives, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the world and allow for more introspection that can help them navigate the challenges, both personal and otherwise that they may face in the digital age.

Why Does Individuality Matter?

This question will be discussed in two ways: firstly, why does individuality matter, in terms of the goals of Singapore education? Secondly, why does individuality matter for the students?

Individuality can be understood as personal identity formed by one's constant reflection upon experiences in life and external influences, such as societal traditions, surrounding the individual (Hinchman, 1990, p. 759). Individuality "imports ethical being" (Lindsay, 1920, p. 423), signalling its importance since it precedes agency and autonomy. The Ministry of Education has listed "self-awareness" and "responsible decision-making" as two out of five "social-emotional competencies" students should acquire under the 21st Century Competencies framework (MOE, 2022a), suggesting that the education system recognises the importance of students understanding that they are individuals so that they can make responsible choices. However, as mentioned above, they are not given the space to explore their individuality beyond what makes them a contributing member to the community. Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) in school are used to emphasise what the students have contributed to the school, as seen in the measures to evaluate students' abilities by having School Graduation Certificates include "non-academic achievements" and "broadening" CCAs to acknowledge student efforts in "student-initiated... and community-based activities" (MOE, 2022b). Students are expected to make an impact during non-academic activities, like

representing the school in national tournaments or initiating projects to provide community service. Arguably, the success of a student's time in school can be perceived through these certifications and testimonials for their character and contributions to the community. Although the system encourages students to do this in order to build strong character, Singapore's high-stress and highly competitive culture has turned "non-academic achievements" into one of the criteria for success, on top of academic achievements.

Rather than on why individuality matters, the question derived from the framework for holistic education thus becomes: how am I disadvantaged if I do not showcase my individuality in terms of non-academic contributions and achievement? Singapore is known for kiasu culture: a colloquial term that means "fear of losing out". A study was conducted on kiasuism among Singapore undergraduate students to conceptualise the term (Bedford & Chua, 2017). The study's findings determined kiasu to indicate behaviour that is perceived to be motivated by the fear of losing out to others. Kiasu behaviour is characterised by constant comparison with others, and the perception of needing to gain something that others are getting despite not actually caring for it. The two mindsets discussed in the study apply: not wanting to "miss out on a potential benefit or common good" and not "fall(ing) behind peers academically". Certificates including non-academic achievements become another measure for comparison between peers, even if the original intentions behind initiating a community project, for example, came from a genuine desire to help others. The value of the project becomes quantifiable; it becomes a question of how much more this student has done for the community as compared to others. The idea of missing out on a potential benefit could spur students to take up leadership roles in CCAs not for the valuable experience of being a leader, but instead, for the title held and having it listed as an achievement. When the majority of students work hard to add to their list of non-academic achievements, the pressure to showcase one's individuality and contribution to the community for a better chance at entering a good school or finding a good job in future increases. In this case, individuality becomes a by-product of one's activities and experiences, what makes them stand out as an individual becomes a metric to pit themselves against their counterparts in a web of limited opportunities. Individuality matters to the extent that it can demonstrate why one is a better candidate than others, rather than simply being a unique individual.

This brings the discussion to the second question: why does individuality matter for the students? On a philosophical level, individuality is seen as the foundation of "all practical interest" (Jordan, 1921, p. 566). This means that one's personal identity, which is separate and distinguishes the self from the others, gives reason for action. However, kiasuism places the distinguishing of self from others as *the* reason for action. When the notion of individuality is centred around comparison with one's peers, the pressure to succeed can become overwhelming. In recent years, there has been rising concern for the mental health of Singapore's youths. The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) conducted the first National Youth Mental Health Study, which found about one in four youths felt "severe or extremely severe" anxiety symptoms, particularly those who are in the 15 to 24 age group as compared to those aged 30 to 35 (2022). Excessive use of social media is cited as a reason, whereby youths are exposed to "constant comparisons" (Verma & Subramaniam, 2024) with what they see on the screen. Not only that, academic stress stems from the students' "own expectations" and expectations from parents and teachers (Tan, 2022). This suggests that students in Singapore form their sense of self through comparing themselves with their peers, which parallels the findings from studying kiasuism. A person's worth is hinged upon one's achievements in comparison to their peers'. Individuality then, as the notion that it provides reason for action, matters because individuality conceptualised via kiasuism has led to poorer mental health

amongst youths in Singapore. In encouraging students to gain a sense of individuality beyond their value for the workforce, they may feel less of a need to compare themselves to and compete with their peers in order to get a better job or higher pay.

How Is Individuality Taught?

In Singapore's education system, the first primary school Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) syllabus that is based on the 21st Century Competencies framework lists "Identity" as one of the Three Big Ideas, and the curriculum attempts to teach students how to have "perception of self". The focus centres around "Being who I am and Becoming Who I can be" (MOE, 2012, p. 13). However, guiding students to form a conception of the self as an individual is subsidiary to the greater objectives of the CCE curriculum, in which students are to form a sense of responsibility for the greater society. Identity is discussed mainly because being "good individuals" must come before becoming "useful citizens" (p. 1). In teaching critical thinking skills for students to be "inquisitive learners" and "critical thinkers" (Sng, 2023), students are indeed provided the space to maintain, in Dewey's words, "healthy scepticism" (1909). According to a paper from NIE, creative and critical thinking push students to apply and adapt knowledge to problem-solve, and sometimes it is done by breaking "established symbolic rules and procedures" (Chiam et al., 2014, p. 35). In encouraging students to judge a problem and find alternative ways to resolve problems, it provides them the space to think for themselves and break away from the uniformity of previously established rules. This is limited to problem-solving, however, and ultimately gears students towards becoming useful citizens and talents in the nation's workforce. Arguably, individuality is not being taught in the way that gives students a sense of their worth as true individuals, but rather, an individual whose identity is valued only as part of the larger construct of society. That said, schools do have time and available resources to enable students to find their sense of individuality.

Recommendations and Conclusion

It is important to recognise that individuality and collectivism are not mutually exclusive. While Singapore's collectivist culture emphasises harmony and cooperation, it does not necessarily suppress individual expression. However, the way that individuality is treated as a by-product or an innate result of holistic education is one that does not lead to students becoming more in tune with their needs and sense of self. While students are given plenty of opportunities to partake in various activities to cultivate interests and skills, as well as take up multiple enrichment classes within the holistic framework of education, individuality as a concept is more of an educational by-product than a goal in and of itself. More emphasis should therefore be placed on encouraging individual expression, as a strong sense of self-identity helps students gain a clearer understanding of themselves, and thus they become more likely to be motivated and engaged in their studies (Johannis & Hung, 2023). Instead of solely focusing on learning subject matter and seeking immediate opinions, schools should prioritise self-discovery through activities like exploring hobbies and interests. This provides them with the space to explore what they like to do within imposing boundaries based on what the school is able to provide the student. Some hobbies may not be readily accessible to students; however, this should not limit them from learning more about the subject matter through resources available such as the school library and the internet, which democratises a large amount of information regarding a diverse array of hobbies. Search activities and guidelines can be issued to students to ensure that they stay on track in terms of viewing and accessing content which is age appropriate. Even if they are not able to carry out their activity

of interest first hand, learning about components of the hobbies can help students understand themselves better, not for the sake of pursuing a plausible career out of their discovery (even though, this can be a part of their search for an interest or hobby). The core of this approach is stemmed in the discovery of the self. This approach allows students to develop a stronger foundation for understanding themselves before engaging with external knowledge. Moreover, schools can consider including a monthly check in in terms of understanding how well students are coping. Currently, the issues of mental health, although greatly de-stigmatised as compared to a decade ago, continues to be a sensitive issue that schools have to skirt around. This is evidenced by how youths in Singapore tend to associate terms of “mental illness” with pejorative words (Pang et al., 2017). Even though there are helplines and resources available for students, they may not feel comfortable to seek out these resources themselves and may not know how to go about approaching their emotions. To ensure that students are well-adjusted given the rise in symptoms of poor mental health, schools must do more to normalise the expression of one’s emotions through regular check in sessions. The issues of societal pressures can be discussed openly rather than swept under the rug, so students are more likely to open up about their troubles and relate to one another, providing effective peer support (Richard et al., 2022) given their shared experience of learning in a high-stress and competitive environment. This not only allows students to become more empathetic towards one another, it helps them to reconcile their emotions of stress and uncertainty, which when left unchecked may lead to detrimental outcomes for the overall mental health of the student population. Through a more extensive curriculum that focuses on the core of self-discovery for self-discovery’s sake and a more introspective approach in dealing with issues of mental health, students can better manage stress, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms that leads to a more holistic assessment of the self, thus enriching the learning experiences of students in Singapore. Future studies can look into how educators can create a learning environment where students feel empowered to express their unique ideas and perspectives around topics which require a higher level of introspection and sense of self. Individuality, as we have discussed, cannot be taught. It ought to be discovered through consistent introspection and participating in activities of interest. The notion of individuality remains at the heart of what makes a person, and within the ten years of compulsory education in Singapore, students should be provided the space to ascertain what makes them who they are.

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