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The “New” Multiculturalism: National and Educational Perspectivesⁱ

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As a self-ascribed “multiracial nation” Singapore has risen to the challenge of managing diversity through its official “Multicultural, Multiracial, Multireligious and Multilingual” (4Ms) components of nation building. The mantra of “unity within diversity,” prompted by economic and political pragmatism rather than a more nuanced understanding of diversity itself, co-opted the education system as a part of societal governance and management. “Comfortable,” yet at times questionable, notions of how diversity was understood, presented and executed in schools dominated the institutionalised narratives prior to more recent seismic changes and challenges which are now compelling the nation to consider the fuller complexity of what diversity or multiracialism/multiculturalism actually entails.

This paper contends that the multidimensional and interconnected impact of economic, political, social and cultural agents has now surpassed hitherto single-minded government attempts to promote “settled rules of political life” and has instigated a new “politics of cultural difference” (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 193). In response to these shifting global and national discourses, officialdom is tactically (re)creating “new” national myths and narratives and carefully calibrating such adaptations. On fuller investigation, the revelation of uncomfortable narratives of latent (or not

so latent) racism, the apparent superficialities of tolerance, acceptance and inclusiveness and the entire relational power paradigm of Singaporeans has been exposed. While Singapore’s concept of mainstream multiracialism and diversity has necessarily widened to contain other communities and their corresponding social, cultural norms, this is being done on the government’s own terms in order to *control* differences and to *sustain* national narratives of cohesion and unification. As part of this effort the education system has been recruited to play a major partnership role.

This paper concludes that the preparation of tomorrow’s adults for a hyper-globalised world cannot be framed within a national context of “diversity-lite,” but demands a full deconstruction of the full complexities of diversity that includes not just mutual respect and dignity but also the pursuit of social justice through global citizenship.

Diversity in Education

The concept of diversity in education is intriguing in its positive connotations for such ideas as inclusion, understanding and even that awkward word “tolerance” for difference that we might encounter daily. Within the educational context, the meaning has a more empowering potential in the suggestion of institutional and official transmission of values and norms

that diversity in education could achieve. Indubitably, the legion of myriad scholarly work on multicultural education - the meaning, potential, challenges, benefits and (un)intended consequences - included necessary forays into social, political, economic and historical contexts of the discussion (Banks & McGee, 2005; Bennett, 2011; Guinier, 2006; Spencer, 1998). A highly politicised issue that underlines the notion of power within structured or unstructured socialisation processes also means it is a highly contestable and contentious subject of analysis and debate. In the much-overused phrase of an increasingly “globalised world,” the importance of deconstructing diversity in education and with that multicultural education has assumed heightened imperatives in any discussion on diversity in education.

For a small nation state, Singapore in the journey from independence in 1965 to our recent 49th national day celebrations, has not been unaffected by these changes. We ourselves have celebrated, and have in turn been widely celebrated, for achieving a commendable degree of economic and social stability among the major ethnic groups. Not an absolutely untroubled journey, it was borne by recognition of a diversity brought together by history and political-economic choices made at the crossroads of history in 1965 and thereafter.ⁱⁱ

We the People of Singaporeⁱⁱⁱ

As a self-ascribed multiracial nation, Singapore has risen to the challenge of managing diversity through its official “Multicultural, Multiracial, Multireligious and Multilingual” components of nation building and equal recognition of the major ethnic groups of Chinese, Malays,

Indians, Eurasians and Other (CMIEO). The 4Ms “to ensure equal representation and equal allocation of resources” (Ooi & Shaw, 2004) together with the refrain “unity within diversity” was girded by economic and political pragmatism. With determined government management and as an efficient administrative tool of ensuring equality of races, this “disciplining” (PuruShotam, 1998) of ethnic differences was further enhanced through institutionalisation of the meritocracy policy^{iv}, bilingual education policies and the socialisation of behaviour against “speaking out of turn” on certain sensitive issues of race and religion, i.e. outside the *OB* (out-of-bounds) markers. In order to pre-empt the practice of using Singapore’s diversity as fault lines for disreputable gains, ethnic diversity was managed against “minority nationalism” (Kymlicka, 2005, p. 23) and hegemonic chauvinism.

Undoubtedly, Singaporeans have advanced in the knowledge and internalisation *of* racial harmony as a national and social good: a proud Singapore identity marker with the education system as an indispensable partner. Directly linked to bilingualism and meritocracy policies, the Singapore education system is a “part of the Singapore success story” (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2008) with the former an attempt at equipping Singaporean pupils with “the language of competencies to access both eastern and western cultures, and to develop a global outlook” ((MOE, 2008, p. 1) The introduction of *National Education* (NE) in 1997 continued this vigilance of sustaining and adapting the country’s ethnic management policies to national and global shifts. Framing the positive benefits of diversity and racial harmony is also the warning of

possible discords that could unleash racial riots as experienced in the past.

Singapore citizens, in spite of the post-2011 elections, have genuine reasons to be proud of the country's achievements as evident by consistent good governance, unrelenting commitment to meritocracy and substantial socio-centric policies. Citizens will generally support the statement by Prime Minister (PM) Mr. Lee Hsien Loong (Lee, 2006) that,

We did not reach this happy state of affairs by chance. It is the result of many years of patient effort. Singaporeans of all races learnt to trust one another, to give and take, and to accommodate each another's different customs and ways of life. The Government fostered racial harmony through many policies. We have upheld meritocracy and equal opportunity for all. We have integrated our population in HDB estates. We have ensured that the minority communities have the space to keep their heritages alive, and not feel pressured by the majority Chinese community.

Abundant self-congratulations were offered as evidence of this commendable state of affairs when Singaporeans of all backgrounds came to condemn any perceived acts that were disrespectful, insensitive or racist towards members of CMIEO. The now infamous racial online commentary of a permanent resident Malaysian-born Chinese in October 2012 became a national story with PM Lee and Foreign Affairs and Law Minister Mr. K. Shanmugam registering their disapproval. The latter judged the postings as "shameful and completely unacceptable" (Anon, 2012). The incident was one of the more

high-profile cases in which the nation collectively stood by the national principles of respect for the various groups of CMIEO and affirmed the credentials and success of both national and education policies. Collective pragmatism has seemingly evolved and been epitomised in credible national behavioural patterns where diversity has become a factual norm rather than an exercise in national and/or educational sloganeering.

Reassuring though this might be, there are noted contrary assessments of the state of diversity and concomitant multicultural education. While not an absolute disavowal of what the nation has achieved, this paper contends that while policies since 1965 have been adroitly adapted to evolving national and global imperatives, there must now be a more nuanced understanding of diversity and differences, and an informed recognition of the interplay of visible and invisibly embedded multiple power structures. There is a pressing need to go "beyond CMIEO" and engage more fruitfully with those communities who exist outside the traditional framework of reference.

The education system, not just as a co-opted but as a symbiotic partner in this societal governance and management, will need to address uncomfortable and at times questionable notions of how diversity is understood and presented as institutionalised, dominant narratives. While this might have sufficed in the past decades, the reliance on what this author has constantly claimed to be the "3Fs" (Ismail, 2007) of understanding difference through the prism of "Food, Fashion and Festival" or the commodification of difference through the "3Cs" of "cuisines, costumes and celebrations" (Ismail & Shaw, 2014), has unfortunate unintended

consequences of perpetuating stereotypes, exoticizing differences and embedding in/visible power structures. The call is to go beyond the passivity and negative associations of tolerance to an understanding that includes genuine empathy and not mere accommodation of the “other.”

The situation has been assessed as social harmony that is “minimalist, maintained by passive tolerance of visible and recognizable differences without substantial cultural exchanges and even less cultural boundary crossings” (Chua, 2005, p. 18). Other critical academic discourses have also explored the intertwining political, social and economic strands (see Benjamin, 1976; PuruShotam, 1998; Clammer, 1998; Rahim, 1998; Barr, 2008; Goh, Daniel, et. Al, 2009; Ismail, 2014) emerging from this efficient management of the different races. “[I]maginary units” (Chua & Kwok 2001, p. 87) can be administratively efficient but they can slip easily into inauthentic aspirations or designations of what a group, especially an “other” should, could or must be in order to be part of a hegemonic definition of mainstream. “Play-nice” encounters of the “3Fs” or the “3Cs” do not necessarily speak to other associated claims emerging from numerical, and with that economic, dynamics: the assimilative impact that these numerical and economic advantages have toward cultures and practices that could not compete for both attention and significance on their own terms. Unsettlingly, a credibility gap between “public cheer” of all is well versus the “private frustrations” of different experiences borne by less privileged members of society (Ismail, 2007) can or has been generated. There are for some in this successful narrative on diversity, seeming costs to the values of

communitarianism and multiracialism (Chua 2005a, pp. 190-191). Crucially, contested narratives or alternative views while not absent or ignored are at times stigmatised as not “rational.” Such an approach or continuation of past practices might not work efficaciously in managing increasingly myriad viewpoints in the new millennium.

The “New” Multiculturalism?

This paper contends that the multidimensional and interconnected impact of global economic, cultural, political and social agencies has now surpassed the hitherto single-minded government attempt to promote “settled rules of political life” and has instigated a new “politics of cultural difference” (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 193). As an undeniably successful global city, Singapore’s national educational approach must therefore face these challenges and embrace more nuanced approaches to diversity. While this paper acknowledges unreservedly the major achievements made by Singapore’s government and people since 1965, it asserts that future challenges to notions of diversity and multicultural harmony must be considered as part of a new multiculturalism that addresses the inadequacies of past approaches while at the same time attending to demands for greater visibility, increased acknowledgement, and sensitive dealings in respect to an increasingly polyglot population.

Recent high-profile incidents and events have reminded or revealed uncomfortable narratives of latent (or not so latent) (Velayutham, 2007) racism within CMIEO and Singapore’s other transient communities, in which the apparent superficialities of tolerance,

acceptance and inclusiveness have exposed the nation's entire relational power paradigm. Undoubtedly, there has been a high degree of national soul-searching not only by compartmentalised CMIEO groups but on the differential treatment meted to other communities who have now formed a significant part of the national landscape. The communities include foreign "guest" workers from South Asia and the People's Republic of China, domestic workers from Southeast Asia and "foreign talent" from parts of the developed world. Major narrative myths have been challenged in incidents such as hostility towards the establishment of a foreign worker dormitory in a residential neighbourhood, reports of mistreatment of domestic workers, the automatic privileging of certain groups with a preferred skin colour and more valued socio-economic occupations together with the normalisation of a racist Islamophobia as a framework of discussion.

In a country with a declining proportion of Singapore born citizens, Singaporeans confront in myriad ways the fact that difference and diversity are marked not just by race, language or religion and their ascribed cultural traits, but other forms of difference that render some permanent, some transitory and others uncertain within a dominantly multiracial and multicultural setting. Indeed, for many, the complexity of navigating Singapore's society is about fractured identity and associated economic anxieties and social uncertainties that mark this age of hyper-globalisation with its transformational change. Events such as the labour strikes by bus drivers/captains from the PRC in November 2012 and the Little India "riot" by South Asian workers in December 2013, stand as seismic events for Singaporeans who have voiced in equal measure both a

racialised analysis and an indignant empathy for those involved.

Crucially, Singapore's responses to the new multiple, global challenges have remained anchored to the core developmental strategies of 4Ms and its associated values. The role of national education has logically been in step with significant responses to these challenges. We have seen the creation and institutionalisation of new national and educational narratives such as the integration of new Singaporeans, the support for a Singapore "strategic cosmopolitan" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 388), the romanticisation of the "HDB heartlanders" and the 2014 National Day theme of "Our People, Our Home." Indeed in retrospect, the promulgation of NE Shared Values in 1991 and the Singapore 21 Report in 1999, appear as anticipatory and evolutionary attempts for educational relevancy in today's age of hyper-globalisation. The apex of these efforts seemingly came in the 21 July 2014 Racial Harmony Day celebrations in schools in which the Minister for Education, Mr. Heng Swee Keat spoke of the need to "reach out beyond the main races here" (Lee, 2014):

Singaporeans have to go beyond understanding the main races here, to respect everyone who lives and works here, regardless of their race, language, or religion, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said on Racial Harmony Day yesterday. Addressing pupils at Elias Park Primary School in Pasir Ris, Mr Heng said Singapore had thrived due to its "openness to international trade flow."

“As Singapore moves towards a more diverse landscape, it is important that we continue to embrace diversity. Let us all do our part to understand other cultures, and going beyond that, let us also be advocates of racial harmony”.^v

While Singapore’s concept of mainstream multiracialism and diversity has necessarily widened to contain other communities and their corresponding social and cultural norms, this is being done on the government’s own terms in order to control differences and to sustain national narratives of cohesion and unification. As part of this effort, the education system has been recruited to play a major partnership role. Part of this process includes directing latent civic consciousness and a new civil society sensibility into “safe volunteerism” (Ismail, 2010) or “responsible advocacy” (Tan, 2009) within and beyond borders. As part of the nurturing process to produce a “rooted Singaporean with a global sensitivity” this direction has drawn criticisms on the dangers of perpetuating further unquestioned power structures (Ismail, 2010).

Characteristic of carefully calibrated social and political adaptations to a globalising and borderless environment, the acknowledgement of widening diversity is a confident and constructive step, but the process is not without its pitfalls, as the recent discordant debates on inclusion and recognition of the gay community in mainstream society have demonstrated (see Mathews, 2014). But as noted by observers, these policy frameworks are sometimes too often “typically left unspecified” (Chua & Kwok, 2001, p. 67) or still part of “managing [acceptable] visibility” (Shaw & Ismail,

2010) of the “other.” To a proposed ban on public drinking within a designated area in Little India after the December 2013 “riot,” a suggestion was offered by an advocacy group (Gee, 2013):

This experience suggests that there’s a better response to the issue of anti-social behaviour resulting from alcohol consumption in Little India than the ban that was put into force. Surely no one can believe that the men who drank there before December have given up alcohol: they’ve just gone somewhere else and some may now be consuming it in other areas where previously there were significantly lower levels of social drinking. Perhaps a more logical response in the future would be to see the areas of Little India where working men gather to meet friends and drink as ‘areas of tolerance’, to be managed and regulated with care, so that any potential problems are anticipated and contained in a timely way.

Outbreaks of disorder notwithstanding, the responses to these milestone events reflect a dynamism within the Singapore leadership and its vigilance on the outcomes and complexities of simplifying the increasingly complex social order as well as a “soft resilience” (Ismail & Shaw, 2011) from its people. The Committee of Inquiry Report of June 2014 had new restrictive orders but highlighted (Anon, 2014) too,

...the importance of communication and cultural awareness in fostering a better relationship between workers and figures of authority. It had recommended basic training in cultural sensitivity for those who frequently interact with foreign workers, such as

bus drivers, timekeepers, auxiliary police and police officers.

The Minister of Education's exhortation on Racial Harmony in July 2014 can be considered to be part of this evolving and pragmatic approach to the complexity of diversity.

The role of national education in moulding and embedding these emerging national values continues in this new climate but the message can still be hindered by previously mentioned penchants for form over substance, the persistence of structural challenges and self-perpetuating weaknesses to core policies (Chua & Kwok 2001, p. 87). The constant challenge would be how to respond to these challenges within the integrated political-social system. Aspirations for a "strategic cosmopolitan" sensibility need to consider an education environment that supports an "active, political participant" (Mitchell, 2003, pp. 387-388). As a sovereign state, Singapore has and will manage its society on its own terms but one that subscribes to a delicate balancing act of sustaining its national survival within the larger social, political and economic global forces that lie beyond its control. To retain selected Singapore traits amidst the changeability and innumerable global influences, the national education narrative must expand its continual vigilance by preparing its younger generation for a multicultural global future that engenders a respectful and critical engagement with the "other" (see Ho, 2009; Poon, 2009). Continuing predominantly with a "diversity-lite" approach to differences will no longer suffice.

...dengan semangat yang baru (In a new spirit)^{vi}

In this current global "age of insecurity" (Elliot & Atkinson, 1998; Judt, 2010), the prognosis is not necessarily doom and gloom. There are attending opportunities to these challenges. If the entire *Singapore Story* narrative is one of internal and external threats, of triumph over adversity, it is also one of resilience from both the authoritative powers and the local populace. Noticeably since the last general election of 2011, the "hard resilience" of the governing authority since 1965 has been complemented by the "soft resilience" of its citizens who are increasingly anxious with the current transformational changes that include rapid migration and growing economic inequities. The "prosperity consensus" borne out of the uncertainty of 1965 is currently being renegotiated through multiple avenues such as "national conversations" sessions, community engagement programmes including non-governmental groups and a slew of new government policies that could be deemed to be more empathetic of ordinary Singaporeans (Ismail & Shaw, 2011). Sensationally described as an "Orchid Revolution" (Arharya, 2011), this floral descriptor of the 2011 election result is an unfair exaggeration of an inherently positive transformational force of governance evident since 1965. Essentially, the phenomenon is a negotiation in the process of resilience and possibly a typically Singaporean outcome. While some might question the viability of this current pace and face of change, it must be noted (SIIA, 2014) that...

[O]ne of the virtues of Singapore's government has been its ability to think technocratically. Policymakers have been able to "do things that are right, not popular." However, the political context in Singapore is changing. In

the current political climate, people in Singapore will increasingly question the government's decisions. As such, the government needs to build institutions that allow for resilient and adaptable governance.

In this, the preparation of future global citizens for a hyper-globalised world demands a full deconstruction of the complexities of diversity that includes not just mutual respect and common dignity but also the pursuit of social justice through global citizenship: an aspiration not just for a small nation state but for any sovereign state, ethnic community or single individual. Correspondingly, the interconnectedness of the global community and the expanding multicultural narratives of differences and its numerous impacts need to be incorporated for an enhanced critical understanding of terminology, practices with associated dangers in duplicating the "dominant" and "subordinate" power status. Global education needs to address diverse global realities which are sometimes structurally embedded as a result of the legacies of geography, history, politics, economics and even an unofficial and invisible privileging. The urgency is to go beyond the obnoxious answers of cultural deficiencies or the inevitability of Social Darwinism. Crucially, there is a need to go beyond a "curriculum of pity" (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002, p. 5) or the self-assuredness of "safe volunteerism." The acknowledgement of the uneven impact of the globalisation movement, cognisant of the global justice movement and of global citizenship could, and should, be part of diversity education where "everything is connected" (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002, p. 3). Such a challenge is not for Singapore alone, but is of eternal relevance to the global community.

For Singapore, with its unique multicultural policies and noteworthy economic growth, this successful strategy is borne not just by the continual balancing of the various domestic and global forms of identity and the demands of economic and political imperatives but also by the act of managing "difference" with a sense of goodwill. While the motivating title of the national anthem, *Majulah Singapura* (*Onward Singapore*) continues to be a much-loved rallying cry, diversity education in Singapore has without doubt evolved progressively within the strictures of political, economic and social demands of national policies and objectives.

Undeniably, the challenges of a diverse world with conflicting issues of respect, affirmation, recognition, inclusion and justice will continue to be of global concern. For Singapore, the challenge is to develop a coherent, integrated and resilient response to a new "politics of difference" (Taylor, 1994) and dignity on multiple fronts. This paper reiterates that whilst pursuing a "new multiculturalism" that goes beyond difference marked by race, the deconstruction of the complexities of diversity should continue to incorporate concepts of social justice through global citizenship especially in this current brave new world: a pursuit underlined by a form of Singapore's resilience and hopefully executed [with] *dengan semangat yang baru*.

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ⁱ This paper was presented in the symposium, 'Diversity in Education: Perspectives, Challenges and Collaborative Actions' at the International Conference on Teacher Education (ICTED) 2014 Quezon City, Philippines 21-23rd August 2014

ⁱⁱ Singapore's dominantly Chinese population has sizable minority communities of Malays (approximately 13.3% in 2013), Indians (9.1%) and, more amorphously, 'Others' (3.3%). Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, "Population Trends 2013 (Singapore)":

Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, 2013) Accessed 10 July Previously available at

http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2013.pdf, p. 3

ⁱⁱⁱ The first five words of the 'Singapore Pledge': *We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.*

^{iv} Meritocracy: system of rewards based on talents, abilities and not of status and family connections.

^v Mr. Heng renewed this message in August 2014 when he spoke of managing "new differences" in attitudes such as sexual orientation and wealth and harnessing these differences as beneficial to the society. See Lee Jian Xuan, "Heng: Critical to manage new differences in attitudes", *Straits Times*, August 6 2014.

^{vi} A line from the second part of the national anthem which is sung Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) which reads:

Marilah kita bersatu
dengan semangat yang baru;
Semua kita berseru,
Majulah Singapura,
Majulah Singapura!

Come, let us unite
In a new spirit
Together we proclaim
Onward Singapore
Onward Singapore