<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Interrogating the transformative promise: Singaporean teachers’ perspectives of diversity and multicultural education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Theresa Alviar Martin and Li-Ching Ho</td>
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<td>Source</td>
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**Paper Title**  Interrogating the Transformative Promise: Singaporean Teachers' Perspectives of Diversity and Multicultural Education

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Interrogating the Transformative Promise: Singapore Teachers’ Perspectives of Diversity and Multicultural Education

Theresa Alviar-Martin

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association

New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

April, 2011

Abstract

This qualitative study attends to six Singaporean in-service teachers’ experiences of diversity and understanding of multicultural education to illuminate the influence of national policies and narratives on teachers’ perceptions and practice. Analysis of interview data and written responses indicated that participants echoed much of the state’s rigid categorizations of racial diversity. Although three of the participants subscribed to transformative multicultural principles, all six teachers enacted pedagogies that rarely challenged statal narratives that emphasized racial harmony and utilitarian, pragmatic educational policies. The authors discuss findings in light of socio-political constraints faced by Singapore teachers and forward implications for teacher education.

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Interrogating the Transformative Promise: Singapore Teachers’ Perspectives of Diversity and Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is a movement that has gained worldwide prominence for its transformative potential (Dilworth, 2008). Citing the ascendance of democracy and transnational migration, scholars increasingly regard multicultural curricula as platforms for achieving justice within societies marked by inequalities based on gender, language, or socio-economic status (Banks et al., 2005). Notably, multicultural education teachers navigate a complex terrain of societal discourse and expectations, educational policy, and personal beliefs as they instruct young citizens about their roles in culturally-diverse democracies (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Current literature attends to multicultural education teachers’ personal beliefs and practice; however, research often overlooks how teacher perspectives and pedagogy are mediated by wider influences, such as societal narratives and national policies relating to diversity (Bockhorst-Heng, 2007; Gay & Howard, 2000). Furthermore, few studies explore how teachers’ experiences with diversity have shaped their multicultural education perspectives and practice. These limitations present important gaps in knowledge about how teachers can be better prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds and gear instruction towards transformative goals.

We seek to expand current scholarship by examining secondary school teachers’ perceptions of diversity and multicultural education in Singapore. A racially heterogeneous city-state, Singapore offers an interesting case to examine educational policies that have explicitly promoted “racial harmony” as a public good in the interest of “national survival” [Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), 2007]. Our study interrogates such claims by making visible the influence of national policies and narratives on Singaporean teachers’ perceptions and practice. Ultimately, we aim to contribute to international efforts in
understanding the evolving concept of diversity, illuminating local and global barriers to transformative multicultural education, and providing a base from which to suggest directions in teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

Banks’ (2008) model of transformative multicultural education posits the achievement of equality and social justice as important school goals. It echoes universalist democratic claims that all children, regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic background are entitled to an education that recognizes their inherent worth as human beings (Gutmann, 2004). As opposed to reform approaches that integrate multicultural content without changing the general structure of the curriculum, transformative approaches call for reconceptualization of curricula so that students are able to critique the status quo, question conditions under which history and policies have been written, and ultimately, take action to promote social justice (Gay, 2002; Miller-Lane, Howard, & Halagao, 2007).

Our study links transformative multicultural education to political theories that position transformative movements at the nexus of societal policies, values, and discourse and an ascending global consciousness of social justice (Benhabib, 2004; Gutmann, 2004). Transformative multicultural education depends heavily on how polities are permeable to extant universalist norms. Benhabib (2004) argues that laws provide the framework within which culture unfurls and equality is contested. In previous work, we discussed how policies can reflect assimilationist, separatist, pluralist, and multicultural policies (Feiberg, 1998), and thus, differentiate children’s access to educational equality (See Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011). Yet, especially within democracies, public discourse and the exchange of ideas in civil society can lead to the “breaking down of political barriers, or at least to assuring their permeability” (Benhabib, 2004, p.196). In this vein, the promise of transformation –
embodied in normative calls for equality and justice – rests on how societies are able to extend discursive and political spaces so as to accommodate these new norms.

Our study is further informed by theoretical assumptions that teacher reflection on identity, including clarifying their understanding of diversity, and illuminating their perceptions of multicultural policy are essential ingredients in achieving transformative multicultural education (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010; Santoro & Allard, 2005). Cultural identity plays an important role in realizing the transformative promise, because cultural evaluations are intrinsically connected to individuals’ interpretation of needs, visions of the good life, and hopes for the future (Benhabib, 2004). Teachers, as cultural and social beings (Irvine, 2002), bring to discursive spaces their needs, visions, and hopes, but likewise bring potential to redefine established meanings related to diversity and multicultural education. Jacques Derrida (1982), in his theory of iterations, contends that in the process of repeating a term or a concept, individuals never simply produce a facsimile of the first original usage and its intended meaning. In fact, there is no real original meaning to which all subsequent forms must conform. Rather, every iteration transforms meaning and enriches a concept in subtle ways. The meanings of multicultural education and diversity are, therefore, not static but are open to interpretation, fluid, and evolving.

Similarly, advocates of transformative multicultural education have long argued for teacher reflection on identity as a cornerstone of teacher preparation (Flores & Day, 2006; Milner, 2005). They maintain that before teachers can recognize how issues such as race, religion, and social-economic inequality influence the learning experiences and cultural realities of students, teachers must learn to ponder their own civic, cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic attachments (Howard, 2004). Beyond building teachers’ self-awareness, multicultural teacher preparation entails consciousness of the historical, psychological, and economic principles that have shaped multicultural education policies (Gay & Howard,
2000). Through an increased self-awareness and consciousness, and subsequently, through their instruction and participation in the public exchange of ideas, teachers can contribute to the transformation of diversity and multicultural education.

**Context – Multi-racial Singapore**

The modern Singapore state was founded in 1819 when Sir Stamford Raffles, representing the British East India Company, established a trading post on a sparsely populated island south of the Malayan Peninsula. Subsequently, the population of Singapore increased dramatically with the immigration of Chinese, Indians, and Malays (Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2005). The British maintained almost continuous control of the island until full independence was granted in 1963, when Singapore became part of Malaysia. Singapore became an independent state in 1965, largely due to the tensions between the Malays and Chinese with regard to the division of political power within the Malaysian federation (Liu et al., 2005).

Postcolonial Singapore was originally conceived of as a constitutionally multiracial state (Chua, 2003). As a heterogeneous country, Singapore had to cope with satisfying the demands of different sub-national groups and addressing the colonial and postcolonial racial divisions that characterized the formative years of the country. There were several major episodes of racial tensions in the 1950s and 1960s that resulted in loss of life and damage to property. Two incidents are particularly prominent - the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots and the 1964 Prophet Muhammad birthday riots (Lai, 2004). The legacy of these tensions can still be felt today, especially in the social and education policies of the Singapore government, including the designation of the anniversary of the Maria Hertogh riots as Racial Harmony Day.

The Singapore state’s approach to multiculturalism exemplifies the pluralist conception of multiculturalism (Ho, 2009). The former Prime Minister Goh described how
the Singapore government conceptualized the relationship between the different ethnic groups as four overlapping circles: “The four circles, each representing one community, will never totally overlap to become a stack of four circles… The overlapping circles approach maximized our common ground but retains each race’s separate identity” (cited in Quah, 2000, p. 84). The post-colonial Singapore government also made the decision to simplify and concentrate the diverse Singapore resident population into four racial groups: Chinese (74.2%), Indian (9.2%), Malay (13.4%), and “Others” (3.2%) (Department of Statistics, 2010). This policy contributed to the essentialization of racial culture and ignored the numerous and substantial difference within these official categories (Chua, 2003). The designation of Mandarin as a heritage language for all people of Chinese descent, for example, erased the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the Cantonese, Hokkien, Hainanese, or Teochew immigrants.

The Singapore government has, in addition, consistently promoted a common national identity, meritocracy, social cohesion, and “multi-racialism,” defined by the former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as giving “every race an equal place in our country” (Goh, 1999). The national pledge of allegiance, beginning with this phrase, “We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language, or religion …” clearly exemplifies this approach (Singapore National Heritage Board, 2004). To further reinforce the emphasis on a common national identity, the Singapore parliament published a White Paper identifying the “Shared Values” of the nation that, for example, urged Singapore citizens to put the “nation before community and society above self” and promote “racial and religious harmony” (Parliament of Singapore, 1991).

Under the motto of “unity in diversity,” Singapore government policies discursively place the different racial groups on parity with one another (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). In 1997, the government introduced a new citizenship education program, National Education (NE).
Explicitly addressing the importance of social cohesion and the promotion of a common national identity, one of the core NE messages states, “We must preserve racial and religious harmony. Though many races, religions, languages and cultures, we pursue one destiny” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007). To further protect minorities, the Singapore constitution includes provisions such as Article 152 that explicitly ensure the protection of the economic, social, educational, and linguistic interests of the Malay minority (Tan, 2004). The government also tightly restricts public and political discourse surrounding racial and religious issues through the use of legal controls such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, the Sedition Act, and the Internal Security Act (Goh, 1999).

Public schools in Singapore place great emphasis on developing a common national identity but remain studiedly neutral with regard to the promotion of group identities. Premised on Feinberg’s conception of pluralism, the Singapore social studies curriculum emphasizes the promotion of a common citizen identity while assigning cultural and religious identities to the private sphere (Ho, 2009). In order to promote “social cohesion within a diverse society” (Singapore Ministry of Education 2008, p. 3) and to ensure the survival of the nation-state, the Singapore government gives great emphasis to multicultural issues in the social studies curriculum because of concerns over past instances of ethnic discord as well as the impact of globalization on the social and political stability of the country. The secondary social studies curriculum document, for example, states that a primary aim of the subject is to develop “citizens who have empathy towards others and will participate responsibly and sensibly in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 3). Chapters in the official social studies textbook focus on case studies of conflicts in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka to remind students of the dangers of religious or ethnic discord. The official history and social studies curricula, in addition, highlight key episodes such as the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s
between the Chinese and the Malays so as to provide a warning against repeating past mistakes (Ho, 2010).

**Methods**

This research draws on the qualitative instrumental case study approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001; Creswell, 1998, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We framed the study around two research questions: (1) What is the nature of Singapore in-service teachers’ perspectives of diversity and multicultural education? (2) What are teachers’ understanding of their roles within Singapore’s multicultural education initiatives and policies? Because this research study’s focal point was the participants’ highly contextual perceptions and experiences that reflected complex and multiple realities, it necessitated the use of a method of inquiry that was naturalistic, interpretive, and focused on context. Given that qualitative research is “emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (Creswell, 2003, p. 180), our study required a flexible framework that allowed us to redirect inquiries in order to further explore emerging issues, and incorporate the complexity of the participants’ daily social interactions and lived experience.

The participants consisted of six in-service secondary school teachers who were enrolled in two graduate level courses at the only accredited teacher education institute in Singapore. The teachers were purposefully selected to mirror the national profile of Singapore’s teaching force (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2009) based on considerations of gender, ethnicity and teaching experience. Table 1 summarizes the teachers’ background information.
The primary data collection methods used in the study consisted of in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and written responses. The interviews were conducted in English as this was the dominant language of instruction in Singapore schools. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews lasted forty-five to sixty minutes and, with the permission of the participants, were tape recorded. The participants answered three sets of questions centered on their conceptions of diversity and multicultural education in Singapore. Questions from the first set focused on how teachers defined diversity within the context of Singapore society, and the extent to which the teachers were conscious of issues of individual or structural discrimination and inequality between different groups. The next set of questions addressed how the participants conceptualized the purpose and pedagogical practices of multicultural education in their classrooms, and focused on the content, skills, attitudes, and values that they chose to incorporate into their lessons. Finally, the last part of our interview focused on how the teachers’ positionality and prior personal experiences shaped their thinking about diversity and understanding of multicultural education. Our goal was to identify possible dominant frames of references, if any, used by the teachers in their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Self-Identification</th>
<th>Subjects Taught</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
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<td>Indian</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Chinese, Sinhalese, Muslim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salim</td>
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<td>Malay, Hokkien (Chinese)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
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definitions of these concepts and examine the extent to which the teachers were able to critically reflect on issues such as power, privilege, and prejudice.

The participants, in addition, contributed detailed written responses to three extracts from different sources. The extracts focused on current issues that we felt were particularly pertinent to the issue of multicultural education in Singapore: (1) meritocracy, (2) equal treatment for all races, and (3) the teaching of controversial topics. The first extract was a quote from the official Social Studies textbook used by all secondary schools in Singapore. The participants responded to the assertion that “Meritocracy helps to give everybody in society an equal opportunity to achieve their best and be rewarded for their performance, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 31). The next extract focused on a recent controversial statement made by the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Contending that the assumption of equal treatment for all racial groups was “false and flawed,” Lee declared that the ideals expressed in the national pledge of allegiance were merely an “aspiration” (Oon, 2009). The third extract highlighted concerns expressed by social studies teachers with regard to the teaching of sensitive and controversial topics. The seminal Report of the Committee on National Education noted that many Singapore teachers “felt ill-equipped to hold discussions on Singapore-related issues” partly because of their concerns about “how open and candid they could be in discussions” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 31).

Four forms of data analysis and interpretation were used, including categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establishing of patterns, and a description of the case (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1997). During the data analysis process, the raw data, including researcher notes as well as transcriptions of interviews were classified and coded with the use of the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 8. Patterns of data and linkages were sought and the raw data was also reviewed under different possible interpretations. During
multiple readings of the text, these codes were then refined and modified to minimize inconsistency and redundancy. Concurrently, interesting patterns and apparent contradictions were also noted (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Results**

The analyses yielded three over-arching themes that describe teachers’ perceptions of diversity and multicultural education. First, the teachers echoed static perspectives that paralleled prevailing policies and public discourse about race and religion and instruction of children from diverse groups. Aside from reflecting a predominantly static perspective, however, a number of participants expressed a re-iterative understanding of diversity that expanded upon existing usage (Derrida, 1982). Three teachers, in particular, re-imagined multicultural education to challenge predominating discourse and emphasize its transformative potential.

**Static Perspectives of Diversity and Multicultural Education**

We observed strong parallels between the participants’ conceptions of diversity and discrimination to state policy and rhetoric. Sharing the state’s narrow emphasis on racial, linguistic and religious diversity, the participants’ responses focused mainly on race and religion. A key finding from this study is the dominance of racial and religious issues in the participants’ conception of diversity in the Singapore context. All six participants, when asked to characterize diversity in Singapore, started by referring to race. Rabiah, a bubbly female Muslim teacher with a mixed heritage, described diversity in Singapore in the following manner,

> The simple meaning is of course the different racial groups … they speak different languages, they believe in different religions, and bring in their own cultures, habits, which is peculiar to them …

Likewise, Yvonne, an ethnic Chinese teacher, described diversity in terms of cultural and religious differences. These responses closely parallel the message conveyed by the social
studies curriculum - the primary vehicle for the promotion of the state ideology (National Education) – that focuses solely on racial and religious diversity (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008).

Notably, participants’ understanding of multicultural education mirrored state initiatives to instill concordance between ethnic groups (Wong, 2000). When asked to define and describe the purpose of multicultural education, most of the participants characterized multicultural education largely in terms of acquiring knowledge about other cultures and understanding people from different backgrounds. Yvonne’s response typified this view:

… (multicultural education) exposes students to different cultures, and awareness that the world has got not just your race or your culture. It’s a lot about opening the eyes to other people.

A majority of participants mentioned that they practiced multicultural education by approaching topics through differing cultural perspectives. Rabiah noted that, when teaching history, she was careful to incorporate differing viewpoints so as to make the materials more meaningful to students. Beyond expanding perspectives represented in the content under study, a few participants said that they practiced instructional strategies to challenge cultural stereotypes or predominating views. Nafees, who taught physical education at a culturally diverse school, explained that certain sports were often considered the province of particular ethnic groups; such as the Chinese being dominant in basketball, and the Malays, sepak takraw (a ball sport popular in Southeast Asia).

So, when you introduce (a sport), you get them to play together and you get them to play as a team...to understand that different races can play the game if given the opportunity. Breaking that stereotype takes a while because this has been ingrained in them...You’ll never see a Chinese boy play sepak takraw, because of that perception, but you'd like them to keep an open mind.

The participants too, echoed much of the state’s utilitarian and pragmatic rationale for the incorporation of multicultural education into the school curriculum. They couched
their responses largely in terms of national survival, adaptability to a changing global environment, preparation for work, and the need to mediate the differences between disparate groups. Rabiah’s and Julie’s responses were typical,

We are going through this period of globalization, we need to know people certain issues, so that you can be sensitive, so that you can act and react to certain situations correctly or appropriately.

In my context I would see it as teaching globalization as part of an enculturation process … teaching our kids to accept the fact that Singapore will be having a lot of foreigners so we jolly well know how to adapt and have some knowledge about where people come from … And our kids will have to go abroad to work in the future so they must understand that not everywhere is like Singapore.

Reframing Diversity

Although the participants’ understanding of diversity echoed the governments’ static categorization of races, they likewise shared perspectives to expand and challenge diversity in Singapore. Unexpectedly, most of the participants perceived that socio-economic class was a much bigger source of inequity and discrimination than race and religion. Nafees, an assistant principal of a school, pointed out the segregation and disparity in family income between students attending a very popular and competitive elite state school and a regular “neighborhood” school. Likewise, Salim observed that this socio-economic gap has become very significant within the different racial groups and argued that racial and religious divisions within Singapore society have become increasingly irrelevant,

For me, these days, it’s not longer that clear, the racial divide, unlike back in the 50s and 60s, it was very easy to play the racial card then. But not now, now it’s more of socio-economic issues, class … not only are the Malay students who are more likely to face a lot of obstacles because of their family background, because of their lack of access to resources, but even my other Chinese students are in the same predicament because of their socio-economic background …

Echoing Nafees and Salim, Kenneth, a Chinese teacher of Design Technology also agreed that economic differences were becoming more significant given, stating that he did not “really see any power imbalance among the ethnic groups.”
Two participants, Julie and Salim, spoke at length about diversity in terms of sexual orientation and the discrimination faced by gays and transsexuals in Singapore. Their opinions, largely shaped by their own personal experiences and their personal friendships, were at odds with the state’s position. As Salim pointed out, sexual affiliation is “a taboo area in Singapore.”

Interestingly, three participants, Julie, Kenneth, and Yvonne, highlighted an increasingly salient division within Singapore society that is not addressed in the formal curriculum – the cultural divide between Singaporeans, new immigrants (mostly from China and India), and expatriate workers. Julie spoke of the changing composition of Singapore’s society due to the increasing number of immigrants,

In the past it meant the four different races, the four distinct races, now I would see it as a melting pot of a lot of expatriates, in particular the PRCs (People’s Republic of China) and they don’t just come in expat nature, they come in all kinds. Singapore is increasingly varied PRCs everywhere I go I meet them …

She then elaborated on the divide between local Singaporeans and foreign workers, particularly those from China,

It could be because they don’t have the most updated impression of China and the truth is that most of the PRCs come here, they don’t take up the most glamorous of jobs … they are seen as husband snatchers too …

Kenneth reinforced Julie’s negative perception and resentment of the impact of expatriate workers on economically vulnerable Singaporeans, particularly “people who are doing jobs at the lower end of the spectrum.” According to Kenneth, these Singapore citizens’ positions are threatened by the presence of foreigners and the employers who prefer to hire them.

The presence of large numbers of new immigrants from China and India disrupts the state-imposed division of Singaporeans into the four CMIO categories, given that these immigrants and foreign workers superficially, at least, speak the same language and share the same Chinese and Indian cultural heritage with many other Singaporeans. Yet, as Julie
and Kenneth pointed out, there is a very real divide between these two groups. This, according to Kenneth, added a new dimension to the cultural landscape of the nation-state,

> When we talk about ethnic diversity, in the past, we talked about groups such as Chinese, Indians, Malays and Eurasians mixing together. That’s in the past, basically when I was in secondary school. But lately over the last 10 years we have a lot of immigrants coming in from many parts of the world, China, India, some of the Asian countries. I think this ethnic diversity now encompasses the rest of these immigrants. That’s my understanding of ethnic diversity.

While all the participants referred to multiple forms of group identity such as class and sexual orientation, only two of the participants addressed the complex and overlapping nature of social identities. All the participants referred to the government’s Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) classification framework that dominates Singapore’s official discourse but only two participants, Salim and Rabiah, questioned the rigidity and inflexibility of the racial categories. Both raised the issue of “grey areas” and the fact that it did not include people of mixed heritage. For example, Salim, a perceptive and critical male social studies and history teacher, criticized both the CMIO and the patriarchal system,

> Diversity is basically in terms of the CMIO model, it’s highly structured, it’s either you fit into the model or you don’t fit in at all. So, on one hand, it makes categorizing very easy but then there will be those people who fall into the grey areas … There’s also another category of Singaporeans who come from mixed heritage. I am one of them. But because we live in a patriarchal society, I have to take on the ethnicity of my dad, conveniently, I fall under the M category because my dad’s Javanese but my mum’s Hokkien. And there are many people like me who comes from mixed heritage, Indian and Malay, other kinds of combination, so where do they fit in? That’s the issue here.

Both participants contested the categories that they were assigned to by the state. Rabiah, spoke of how she adopted a Malay identity as a result of being Muslim,

> At home, I am very very flexible because my mum’s Chinese and my father’s Sri Lankan, so we are very very , we accept lots of things … Yes, because I am exposed to the Malay culture … in schools, and even at home, because what happened is that because we converted to become Muslim, and in order for us to know more about the religion, we have the tendency to mix with the Malays, and that shaped our culture, beliefs and customs, and everything… and we adopt the Malay culture as part of our culture …
This issue proved particularly salient to Salim and Rabiah because of their mixed heritage. The postcolonial Singapore government’s inflexible categorization of the populace into the four official racial groups - Chinese, Indian, Malay, and “Others” – essentializes these racial groupings as a heritage of ideas and practices that govern the lived experiences of the collective and the individual. These four racial groups are seen to possess primordial cultural characteristics that influence the behavior of the individual who is assigned, by the state, to the group. Salim and Rabiah’s responses, however, reflect Banks (2006) argument that these traditional categories “will become more contested as marginalized racial, ethnic, and language groups grow in size, power and legitimacy” (p. 156).

**Re-imagining Multicultural Education**

Despite reaffirming the state’s instrumental position with regard to the purpose of multicultural education (Wong, 2000), a majority of participants recognized the limitations of such an agenda. One participant, Salim, mentioned that ironically, some teachers and textbooks promoted racial harmony through “scare tactics” meant to underline the dangers of ethnic discordance:

> The students are bombarded with a series of riots, the Maria Hertogh riots, so it’s all the negativity, what will happen if we don’t practice multiculturalism or respect for one another.

The teachers also pointed to mandated school events such as Racial Harmony Day in characterizing multicultural education in Singapore as “superficial” and “cosmetic.” In this vein, participants’ responses indicated a clear tendency towards contributive and additive approaches (Banks, 2003) with regards to their current understanding and practice of multicultural education. As Kenneth observed, “If you talk about trying to really integrate the various kinds of cultures on a daily basis, I don’t see much of this going on.”

In his typology of multicultural content integration, Banks (2003) advocates for the reframing of curricula towards transformative approaches that address issues of inequality
and injustice. Although most participants tended towards contributive and additive multicultural typologies, a number of participants echoed transformative principles as they discussed alternative approaches to multicultural education in Singapore.

Salim, who expressed concern for the narrow and at times cautionary perspective of diversity that framed Singaporean policies, suggested that national “top-down” multicultural initiatives needed to shift towards a model of authentic social cohesion. He cited grassroots efforts in response to recent bushfires in Australia as an example:

How the different ethnic groups (worked together), including the minority ones…was highlighted explicitly in the Australian media. The mosque, the churches, the synagogues, even the migrants, the Vietnamese, the Lebanese, came forward to donate blood, to offer whatever form of assistance for the sake of the victims. So that is a good example that can be used as a case study.

Other participants likewise underlined the need for multicultural education to involve strategies such as questioning government policies relating to diversity. Julie, for example, articulated her unease over the secondary social studies curriculum’s presentation of the four races as uncontested, with little reference to local indigenous cultures.

In all, three participants mentioned skills, attitudes, and knowledge that teachers needed to incorporate into their instructional repertoire in order to reflect a more transformative stance. For Nafees, multicultural education necessitated teachers to become more familiar with – and addressing – the needs of their students, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For Salim and Julie, multicultural education required students’ learning values of open-mindedness and respect, skills to evaluate divergent viewpoints, and perspectives from underrepresented groups:

(Multicultural education) can provide a platform for the minorities, not just the ethnic minorities, but those from the less fortunate in terms of socio-economic class to have more voice, more recognition, to have more say.
I think that there can be more sharing, by people who have been marginalized… including gays and the foreigners…to hear their side of the story. That would also teach the kids to value balanced judgment …

Nafees further positioned multicultural education as a societal initiative to narrow the divide between dominant and oppressed socio-economic groups. As a teacher of academically and economically disadvantaged students, he expressed both “hope and fear” for his students:

…In the Singapore context, we’re just pushing everybody towards success…I think for these students, they should have attachments to companies that will pay them a decent wage, so at least there’s job security, rather than having them compete in the open market. They’re going to lose out, because in terms of academic qualifications, they already lose out to the others…Maybe that’s the way to take care of your…the lower end of the group, so that you can be considered a successful, first-world nation.

In sum, the participants revealed a clear divide between their current understanding and practice of multicultural education and what they believed multicultural education in Singapore should be. The teachers’ responses likewise indicated factors - such as tendencies to avoid controversy and emphasize test preparation - that influenced their capacity to enact practices that captured their ideal, transformative model of multicultural education. These factors will be explored more fully in the following section.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The previous section focused on teachers’ perceptions of diversity and multicultural education and key influences that shaped Singaporean teachers’ understandings. First, findings indicate that although a majority of the participants based their conceptions of diversity primarily through static racial categories codified by the state, a few teachers recognized nuanced, overlapping, and overlooked markers of identity that are challenging notions of diversity in Singapore and elsewhere. Second, the study illustrated teachers’ awareness of how Singapore’s pluralist policies mediated their practice of multicultural education and differentiated the educational opportunities afforded to students. Some
teachers seemed to acknowledge prevailing discourse and political barriers as they expressed static perspectives of multicultural education; however, Julie, Nafees, and Salim envisioned alternative models and pedagogies to re-imagine education towards a transformative agenda.

In this discussion, we revisit findings, focusing on political and social barriers to transformative multicultural education: (1) meritocracy and testing, (2) Singapore’s CMIO model, and (3) the absence of oppositional viewpoints. Within each section, we discuss teachers’ differing responses to these constraints. We conclude the study by suggesting directions for teacher education research and practice.

The first constraint on the teaching of transformative multicultural education in Singapore secondary schools is the policy of meritocracy and its attendant focus on summative, high-stakes examinations. Most of the participants noted that, ironically, meritocracy contributed to the marginalization of low-income groups that are dominated by minorities. Among the responses to meritocracy, we were most intrigued by those of Kenneth, Nafees, and Yvonne, who comprised participants with the most years of teaching. Yvonne and Kenneth were ethnic Chinese teachers working in reputable schools that served mainly Chinese students. Yvonne voiced strong support for meritocracy. Inspired by her family’s work ethic and upward mobility, she encouraged her students to “work hard in order to succeed.” Kenneth, unlike Yvonne, showed awareness of the constraints posed by high stakes testing on minority students’ academic prospects; however, he was resigned to meritocracy as a distinctive facet of Singaporean schooling. In contrast to Kenneth and Yvonne, Nafees, an ethnic Indian, suggested concrete measures for granting marginalized students equal educational and professional opportunities, such as establishing alternative assessments and school-work attachments for low-achieving students. Notably, while referring to the challenges posed by his cultural minority status in criticizing meritocracy,
Nafees couched his responses primarily through his experience of teaching in a school that served low-achieving students from economically-depressed households.

The case of Nafees reminded us of the crucial role of school context in shaping teachers’ perspectives of multicultural education. As studies of experienced teachers indicate, those who worked in culturally-diverse, economically-depressed communities, and reflected on their students’ learning styles, built awareness in viewing education through a framework of social justice (Marri, 2005; Merryfield, 1998). Nafees’s responses revealed how his interactions with students led to recognition of the challenges that they faced under Singapore’s meritocratic educational system: “My perception has changed because of all of these students. You might think that because they fail their exam, that they are lazy, but for most of them, generally they fail because the exam is not meant for them.” Nafees further argued that an examination-driven education encouraged teaching methods that neglected cultural minority students’ learning styles. His observations echo scholars’ contentions that high-stakes testing stifles teachers’ abilities to enact culturally-responsive teaching, particularly, their ability to recognize how students learn and build on what students know (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Second, narrow interpretations of diversity that fail to capture individuals’ complex affiliations and identities also constrain transformative multicultural education (Banks, 2004, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the 1980s, German separatist policies branded ethnic Turkish students – many of whom had been born in Germany – as outsiders, resulting in schooling that denied them educational opportunities to ultimately thrive in German society (Castles, 2004). Similarly, in Singapore, the pluralist CMIO model hinders multicultural education by subsuming citizens into four racial groups, disregarding nuances of identity based on linguistic, religious, or cultural affiliations, and overlooking the unique identities and experiences students bring to schools. The relatively recent arrivals of thousands of new
immigrants and foreign workers have also shifted the meanings of difference and otherness in Singapore. This, however, is not captured in the state-constructed CMIO categories and does not form part of the official multicultural discourse in schools and in teacher education programs. Because of this, teachers are inadequately prepared to address the unique needs of immigrant children in their classroom. Given that these students may face problems such as dislocation and cultural disorientation (Goodwin, 2002), it is important for teacher preparation programs to embrace a broader and more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity.

Researchers have found that teachers from minority or “outsider” identification groups drew on their personal identities and histories to recognize the educational constraints faced by cultural minority students (Irvine, 2002; Urietta, 2004). Two participants of mixed heritage, Rabiah and Salim, emphasized that Singaporean policies deprived citizens who did not “fit” into the four racial categories freedom to define themselves. Yet, between the two, Salim showed more awareness of how the CMIO model and meritocracy hindered minority students’ educational opportunities. He spoke forcefully of the need to shift Singapore’s pluralist policies towards an “authentic, ground-up” approach in order to achieve social transformation. In contrast, Rabiah, while questioning the CMIO model, voiced support for meritocracy. Like Yvonne, her perceptions of multicultural education were strongly mediated by her family’s ethic of hard work.

Finally, a key political and social constraint was the evident reluctance of Singapore educators to express oppositional viewpoints within the classroom, particularly with regard to multicultural issues. In the U.S., scholars have noted that many educators avoid conflict and controversy and few “totally eschew self-censorship” (Cornbleth, 2001, p. 84). Similarly, in Singapore, teachers are constrained by the state’s desire for order and stability. In 2005, for example, the Singapore government used the Sedition Act to prosecute three
young bloggers who made racist comments about members of minority groups (Popatlal, 2005). The majority of our participants acknowledged the delimiting influence that policies such as the Sedition Act had on their teaching. However, only Julie and Salim, who shared concerns about the discrimination faced by their homosexual and transgender friends, recognized the importance of classroom teaching that included marginalized perspectives and contentious public issues. The case of Julie was exceptional, because she was the lone ethnic Chinese participant who, in spite of her majority status, positioned multicultural education as a platform for equality and social justice. In all, the study illuminated the complex interplay of identity, diversity, and policy in teachers’ understanding and enactment of multicultural education. Nafees, Rabiah, and Salim, particularly, emphasized the crucial role of reflection in preparing teachers to view themselves as agents within a framework of transformative multicultural education.

Howard (2003) argues that teachers must first learn to ponder their own attachments and identities before they can recognize how issues such as race, ethnicity, religion, and social-economic inequality influence the learning experiences and social and cultural realities of their students. In our study, Rabiah and Salim underlined the challenge for teacher preparation programs to accommodate the complex identities that student-teachers bring to class. Although these teachers’ mixed linguistic and cultural heritage seem unusual, their profiles are becoming increasingly commonplace under conditions of globalization and transnational migration (Banks et al, 2005; Castles, 2004). Even those participants who “fit” the CMIO model mentioned religious or linguistic affiliations to clarify that they were not “just” Chinese or Indian. An issue for teacher educators, therefore, is how to encourage teachers to reflect upon the nuances that comprise their identities and apply these reflections to better understand the realities faced by their students. At present, research has explored teachers’ civic, ethnic, and socio-economic positioning, and how these informed the ways in
which they engaged with students from diverse backgrounds (Marri, 2005; Merryfield, 1998; Irvine, 2002; Santoro & Allard, 2005). We would like to see this line of inquiry extended to capture how teachers’ reflections upon their multiple and overlapping identities can inform instruction of students from increasingly complex backgrounds.

Notably, our findings support contentions that building self-awareness and cultivating openness to diversity are important but initial ingredients in the development of teachers’ commitment to social justice (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010). Nafees and Salim exemplified individuals who, upon reflecting on their own challenges as “outsiders,” built an awareness of the political constraints faced by marginalized groups, and developed commitments to address these injustices. In contrast, Rabiah, through her responses, showed a lack of understanding of Singapore’s meritocratic policies, particularly, how meritocracy hindered opportunities for cultural minority students. These cases illustrate that, beyond reflection on identity and diversity, there is a need for teachers to examine how political, cultural, and economic principles have shaped what multicultural education is and what it should be (Gay & Howard, 2000). Theorists such as Benhabib (2004) and Derrida (1982) remind us that concepts such as diversity and multicultural education are contested in civil society. Teacher preparation, therefore, can - and must - challenge narrow perceptions of these concepts in order to influence public discourse and ultimately, shift policies relating to the education of children from diverse backgrounds. Especially in societies where separatist, assimilationist, and pluralist ideologies dictate educational policies, teacher education programs should encourage teachers to surface how entrenched socio-political traditions constrain their own multicultural pedagogies and practice.

Finally, this study underlines the role of teacher preparation within wider socio-political contexts. As Gay (2005) contends, there is a need to recast teacher education in order to reflect agency towards political change. In this vein, classroom-based teacher
preparation must be paralleled by efforts at the institutional level, to posit teacher education as a form of advocacy in bridging social inequalities and achieving social justice. Although this study revealed political constraints that seem unique to Singapore, our findings resonate across societies where narrow codifications of diversity, high-stakes testing, and climates of censorship increasingly hinder the opportunities of children who have been disenfranchised due to cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic backgrounds. As educators ponder how best to prepare young citizens for their roles in diverse yet interdependent communities, this study of Singaporean teachers holds implications for the field of teacher education and, in particular, the preparation of teachers in realizing multicultural education’s transformative promise.
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