Discursive compartmentalization in a critical multicultural classroom

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Introduction

One of the key paradigmatic and practical issues which Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) is concerned with is how to account for competing discourses in situated contexts which will allow for holistically, critically and culturally conscious analyses of discursive formations. CDS, in other words, mobilizes research on such competing discourses by aiming to provide nuanced and specific understandings of and solutions to culture-specific issues and problems. The implication here is that investigating cultural discourses requires appropriate and innovative methodologies and analytical frameworks in order to generate context-sensitive analyses and interpretations. Although always an epistemological challenge, the point here is that we should always be committed to deploying analytical tools which help us unpack and clarify, rather than obscure, unique cultural practices, discourses and dispositions.

Singapore, in this sense, is an intriguing case study for the mobilization of research that seeks to do just that: investigate practices, discourses and dispositions through the specific cultural lenses of the people and institutions which produce them. There are many reasons for this. For example, Singapore throughout its history has self-consciously declared itself as a culturally unique nation with its own political system that could not be judged through the lenses of so-called Western values and ways of thinking. Here it toes the line of researchers and scholars who expose the ethnocentric bias of Western scholarship. However, such a self-conscious declaration of cultural uniqueness has ironically also been used by the political establishment to discourage any form of cultural criticism as this allegedly would have been
influenced by Westernized ‘critical’ dispositions which threaten national harmony and progress. Anyone who is ‘critical’ – that is, questioning of particular policies and decisions of the government – is anti-Singapore, has forgotten his/her ‘Eastern’ Confucian way of life, or has fallen prey to destructive ‘foreign’ values. Western critics of its own brand of politics and cultural management have also been dismissed as ethnocentric or culturally biased. Thus, in deploying culturally sensitive research in Singapore, it is important to recognize the fact that the State’s valorization of ‘Eastern’ – and demonization of ‘Western’ – cultural practices and dispositions always mediates any reading of the country’s cultural discourses. CDS is very helpful in this regard because it allows us to see discourses as emerging from historically unique sites of cultural transformation. A classroom, to give one example, is in fact a ‘locally’ situated context which is constitutive of intersecting local and translocal histories and ideologies mediated by specific human interactions and artefacts. To put it in another way, CDS allows us to assume that people and institutions deal with ethnolinguistic diversity and knowledge claims in radically different ways (Uitermark, Rossi, and Houtom 2005, p. 623; Candela 2013; Moutinho 2014) because of their unique historical, cultural and sociopolitical trajectories.

This paper aims to map out the discursive (re)configurations of one particular classroom in a teacher-training institute in Singapore where students (in-service teachers who are taking their Masters in Education) are introduced to ‘critical’ discourses on multiculturalism which not only demands respect for all groups of people (that is, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and so on), but also excavates the voices of those who have been traditionally silenced or marginalized in texts used in teaching and learning. Keeping true to the politically strategic aim of CDS to explore culturally appropriate ways to study discursive practices and formations, the paper’s entry point will be the student teachers themselves (from hereon, to be...
referred to as ‘teachers’) by letting them speak to us about the ways they deal with discourses that circulate in the classroom -- ‘critical’ discourses, on the one hand, and State-constructed discourses, on the other hand. A typical approach to investigating contending discourses is how one overpowers the other, or how they mesh together to form another distinct discourse, but what we have found is rather different – the teachers *compartmentalize* the discourses. We contend that such discursive compartmentalization is produced and mediated by the political culture of teaching and learning in Singapore whose trajectory extends to how the local population has been historically disciplined in a huge part by a subtle aversion to so-called ‘critical’ and ‘western’ values which threaten national cohesion and progress.

Thus, through the lens of the teachers’ discursive maneuvering, we seek to ask and answer the following questions concerning the nature of discourses in the classroom: (1) What happens when ‘critical’ and State-induced discourses circulate in the classroom? (2) How do teachers make sense of these cultural discourses in the light of their experiences as Singaporean teachers? (3) What is the role of the state and its ideologies in shaping the way cultural discourses are apprehended in the classroom? The teachers have been sensitized into ‘critical’ perspectives on multiculturalism and multicultural literature, including sustained engagements with a vast range of journal articles and multicultural picturebooks which highlight issues of marginalization, disenfranchisement and social justice. This is especially relevant given the increasing diversity in the student population of Singapore where as much as 39 different nationalities can be seen in a popular primary school (Forss 2007). The growing diversity in the Singapore educational landscape is likewise evident in terms of the disparity in socio-economic status, ability levels, religion, linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a regular classroom setting (Khum 2013). However, as mentioned above, we aim to show how the teachers
compartmentalize their two worlds of cultural discourse, and this is so because of deeply ideological sociopolitical contexts within which they operate. They do not reject their critical perspectives in favor of the safer and more familiar tropes of teaching and learning, but they enter into (or more appropriately, return to) another discursive frame which is deeply historicized and imbricated in larger infrastructures of education and nation-building dictated by the State.

Thus, viewed once again from the trajectory of the teachers’ deeply situated everyday cognitions and classroom practices, we argue that their compartmentalization of disparate discourses is perfectly understandable and should not be devalued as another demonstration of lack of criticality among local teachers. They engage more in acts of compartmentalizing – rather than appropriating – discourses, in order to accommodate critical discourses into their understanding of multicultural issues, but without unsettling State-defined collectivist norms drawn upon the notion of Singapore as a unique historical entity which will be threatened by ‘Western’ critical ideas (Chua 2007; Thomson 2001; Ang & Stratton 1995). Thus, the challenge should not simply be how to make them ‘critical’ teachers, but how to let them envision new or alternative ways of teaching and learning by reconstituting their prior knowledge and experience -- but still within the ‘safe spaces’ of the classroom (Ho 2010: 240). This paper is a sobering reminder about the complexity of classroom contexts within which cultural discourses are circulated, negotiated and contested, and especially in contexts such as Singapore which has had a history of deploying the ideology of ‘Asian cultural particularity’ (Thompson 2001: 155), and resisting what it has constantly referred to as degenerate ‘Western’ ideas and embracing (or legitimizing) ‘Asianising’ discourses of compliancy and respect for authority.
A brief sketch of the Singapore educational landscape

Much has been written about the Singapore education system (e.g., Gopinathan 1988; Yip & Wong 1990; Tan & Gopinathan 2000; Ng 2008; Dixon 2005; Ho 2010) but one important point to mention here is the contention of many scholars that while educational institutions around the world are invariably shaped or dictated by states and governments to advance their own political agendas, the Singaporean case stands out as one example of how education has been placed almost exclusively under the control of government and one political party (Ho 2010; Tan 2009).

The People’s Action Party (PAP) has governed Singapore since 1959, a few years after it became independent from British colonial rule in 1956. That it ‘has always valued education and made it a strategic investment in its governing mission’ (Poon 2010: 32) is a ‘statement even its fiercest detractors would be hard-pressed to deny’ (32). The Singapore case is also special because of the fact that the hugely top-down educational infrastructure of the government has been credited for Singapore’s economic miracle, as well as for the country’s stellar performance in international tests in Mathematics and Science especially in recent years (Dixon 2005). Immediately after independence, the PAP-led government began a massive nation-building project aimed at re-engineering the Singapore society by demolishing the stranglehold of the very small English-speaking elite (who thrived during the British rule), as well as diffusing ethnic communalism among the various language and dialect groups in the country. It pursued a kind of race-based bilingual education which placed emphasis on English as the sole medium of instruction, but also discursively challenged ‘Westernization’ through English by requiring the learning of one of the three official ‘mother tongues’, namely Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Education, in other words, became a key political and ideological mechanism through which the PAP government
could exercise almost absolute control over the hugely multilingual populace. To put it in another way, Singapore has been and continues to be ‘a highly and centrally planned society’ (Bockhorst-Heng 2002: 560), and education has been deployed to make this possible.

The role of education even became more prominent when Singapore was unceremoniously expelled from the Federation of Malay States in 1965 because of fundamental political differences between the Chinese-dominant Singapore government and the other Malay states. Without natural resources, with very low literacy rates among the local population, and with a hugely multilingual people with vague understandings of their configuration as one Singapore ‘nation’, the government developed an elaborate race-based political discourse (Chua, 2007) that would help them legitimize their project of social engineering, even if this means ‘penetrating deep into the lives of its citizens’ (Hill & Fee 1995: 23). Such a political discourse revolved around the notion of ‘sacrifice’, ‘survival’ and ‘vulnerability’ in the name of economic development, which basically means undermining personal desires and sentiments for the sake of the common good. Singapore was – and still is – hugely multilingual with the composition of the three major ethnic groups remaining remarkably stable through the years: Chinese (76.8%), Malay (13.9%) and Indian (7.9%) (Ooi 2005). The multilinguality and multiraciality of Singapore were -- and still are -- framed as a problem that needed to be addressed or curbed because they presented ‘an on-going threat of social unrest’ (Bockhorst-Heng 2002: 561), even if there ‘have actually been only a few instances of racial (or other) disturbance in Singapore’s history’ (561). In other words, Singapore’s vision of multiculturalism has served as a mechanism of control by limiting people’s view of cultural difference as difference grounded solely in race relations which, in turn, has made visible only three main ‘races’ in Singapore – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with a fourth ‘race’ reserved for people of mixed parentage referred to as ‘Eurasian’
Any discourse or practice that insinuates a more complex vision of multiculturalism (for example, one that deploys class-based lenses) is – and has been – met with punitive State actions (Chua 2007).

One implication of conscripting national identity and development to an exclusively racialized view of multiculturalism – a point that needs to be highlighted here as this is crucial in making sense of the specific ways the teachers engage with a wide array of multicultural discourses in the classroom – has been to harness a compliant people who began to be convinced that specific ethnolinguistic desires by and large could be potential sources of disunity and conflict, and thus must be suppressed by all means. To give one example, the use of Mandarin as a mother tongue (which was almost non-existent in the 1950’s) was not only imposed upon the Chinese ethnic group as the main language of communication, but this was accomplished through draconian measures to outlaw the use of the more dominant Chinese ‘dialects’ (e.g. Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka) in the public sphere, and practically force all Chinese Singaporean students to study Mandarin as their ‘mother tongue’ even if, sociolinguistically, it was not the mother tongue of most Chinese Singaporeans (Bokhorst-Heng 2002). Thus, it was no coincidence that the homogenization of national education began in the 1960s. The aim was to wrest control of the content and structure of education from the erstwhile dominant language and dialect groups, as well as from foreign education specialists and systems from the United Kingdom (for English-medium schools), India (for Tamil-medium schools) and China (for Mandarin Chinese-medium schools), in order to establish its own national ideology. The government became – and continues to be -- the great ‘educator’ (Gopinathan 1988: 136) to ‘ hectored, cajole, persuade and inform’ (136) the entire nation about what is good and bad in the country. In this regard, as mentioned earlier dissenting voices were not only discouraged but,
more importantly, severely punished, on grounds that they would disrupt peace and order and undermine the quest for racial harmony and national unity (Bockhorst-Heng 1999). Education also served as a tool for ethnic management (Chua 2003), thus any topic or issue raised inside or outside the classroom and the school that would question government policies about multiculturalism, or provide alternative ways of viewing ethnic relations would be considered taboo.

The point here that is relevant to our data analysis is that in practically all spheres of the Singaporean public life, most especially in education and the media, political parameters were set in terms of what were acceptable and unacceptable topics and points-of-view. These parameters years later would be institutionalized as ‘Out-of-Bound’ or OB markers, a golfing metaphor set in the early 1990s by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in the light of his desire to let Singaporeans ‘know where the limits of open and consultative government lie’ (Goh in Tan 2009: 56). The markers then have ‘come to dominate contemporary discourse on Singapore’s public sphere’ (Tan 2009: 56). However, the problem with these markers was that they ‘are not clearly defined until you cross them’ (Bockhorst-Heng 2002: 563), although it could be argued that this was actually a stroke of genius on the part of the government. Today, OB markers, albeit vague, continue to influence or control the Singaporean psyche, being justified partly on grounds that Singapore is a unique historical construction which cannot be subjected to external (read: western) standards of democracy and human rights. Among journalists, the OB markers have resulted in ‘a rigidly self-imposed censorship’ (563) while among teachers, the OB markers ‘whether real or perceived, operate to create fear and a “pragmatic” stance, in which teachers have to be careful not to cross into certain, albeit ill-defined, areas of public discourse’ (Baildon & Sim 2009: 415). The deeply successful deployment of OB markers as a deterrent for political
dissent and critical activism inside and outside the classroom may perhaps be poignantly captured by the following view of a local teacher (in Baildon and Sim) who was asked about the viability of deploying critical thinking in the teaching of social studies:

OB markers are the perimeters we shouldn’t cross because we would get into trouble and not that we think we would… they’re not blockages in our mind but real unspoken markers that if you openly disagree in public, you may get into trouble. For instance (now I’m running a risk) the so-labelled Marxists’ conspiracy… did anyone defend the youth arrested under the Internal Security Act? People just stopped talking about it in public out of fear. [It’s about] pragmatism. If arrest can happen, why risk it with the law that can’t protect you because your rights may not align with what those in power want to give. If this paragraph comes through fuzzy, remember I’m typing in semi-fear! That’s the work of the OB markers! (415, italics as original)

In the sections that follow, we show how such ‘control mechanisms’ (Geertz 1973: 44) shape – and even dictate – the thought processes and behaviours of teachers despite the exciting prospects of critical awareness and engagement through a very successful course (obtaining a Teaching Index Score of 98.9 out of 100 based on student feedback). We do not in any way argue that the control of such mechanisms over teachers is absolute; there will always be spaces for negotiation and resistance. However, through our data, we are able to track how such mechanisms impact teachers in particular ways, especially as they engage in what we refer to
above as acts of discursive compartmentalization as their strategy both to confront the critical multicultural discourses which they have come to accept and affirm, as well as acquiesce to the dominant political culture of classroom practice as shaped largely by ‘OB markers’. Broadly speaking, we already know about the embeddedness and the political limitations of critical education, and that there have already been a wide range of proposals on how to use the classroom as the battleground for critical thinking and social transformation (see Kirk 1986; Pennycook 1990). However, as we mentioned in the beginning of our paper, there is a need to account for the specific ways ‘critical’ and ‘transformative’ discourses and practices in education take more specific form in the classroom (see Tupas 2014).

THE STUDY

The results in this paper are drawn from a much larger set of data collected through a SGD 99,088 (approx. USD 72,140) research project which explores the use of multicultural children's literature in classrooms in Singapore, and funded by a teacher training institute in Singapore. The research project broadly aims to investigate the reading habits, attitudes, and practices of teachers who are currently enrolled at a teacher-training institute in Singapore, and how these influence their teaching in the classroom. A more specific aim is to determine how teachers respond to critical multicultural discourses introduced in class and whether or not they find value in them as they begin thinking about how to use multicultural children’s texts in their own classrooms. The data included in this paper are drawn from students who attended a higher degree course, ‘MSE 835/SA 1009: The Use of Multicultural Children’s Books to promote Socio-emotional Learning (SEL)’ in 2015. One set of data is drawn from short written student
answers to questions concerning their understanding and views about multicultural children’s literature, and how these views could potentially impact their teaching after attending the course. Another set is drawn from a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) at the end of the course to explore similar questions. The two modes of data collection across the same set of respondents – short written individual answers and an FGD – would also lend themselves to possible comparison and contrast of answers to the same broad set of questions about multicultural children’s literature, their understanding of it, and how they plan to use it in their classroom after being introduced to critical ideas about multiculturalism.

English was used to collect all data for the research project as this would be the language the respondents are comfortable using. It must be noted that English is the primary medium of instruction in all levels of education – from primary level to graduate level. Although Singaporeans speak at least one language, all those who attended formal education from 1987 to the present would have gone through English as the primary medium of instruction, resulting in what scholars now refer to as an English-dominant multilingual society (Tupas 2011). Thus, the use of English to solicit responses from respondents would have had no significant impact on the quality and quantity of their answers.

The course

The course elective was designed to build teachers’ awareness of a more inclusive definition of multiculturalism that goes beyond portrayal of different races in children’s literature to include books about children and adults who are different from the White middle-class mainstream ‘regardless of religion, race, ability, gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic
status, body image, language, political beliefs, or ethnicity’ (Luken, Smith & Coffel 2013: 19). However, the course also assumes that ‘[m]erely acknowledging the existence of a variety of different groups and cultures is not sufficient; we also have to take the unequal power relations between different groups, as well as within groups into consideration’ (Todorova 2010: 230).

The 39-hour course module was conducted at a teacher-training institute in Singapore over a span of 13 weeks and is open to all higher-degree students who are taking their Masters of Education or PhD in various specializations. The course elective is part of the teacher-training institute’s response to the call of the Ministry of Education to instill “soft-skills” and character development and values education that would enable the Singapore youth to succeed in a more globalized and interconnected world (MOE, 2009).

The course module used the following theoretical frames: (1) Botelho and Rudman’s (2009) critical multicultural analysis of children’s texts whereby race, gender, and class ideologies in children’s literature serve to reveal the historical and sociopolitical dimensions of culture and (2) Rosenblatt’s (2005) aesthetic reading framework which takes into greater account the deeper qualitative and affective response that could be evoked from the text and could be summoned from the reader.

A critical multicultural analysis framework (Botelho & Rudman 2009) in reading provides a constructive handle for teachers that would facilitate this kind of aesthetic response from the reader. It creates spaces for children to connect texts to their life experiences and other texts (literary/nonliterary) and the world (Botelho & Rudman 2009). There are key critical questions teachers may ask in the classroom that eschew the traditional assumption that there is a singular correct way of finding answers from a text (Woolridge 2001), hence teachers are no
longer the keepers of textual meaning (Botelho & Rudman 2009), signifying a more meaningful and more affective understanding of multicultural children’s literature.

**Description of Respondents**

The participants of the study are 28 in-service teachers (24 female and 4 male teachers) between the 36-50 age groups. These teachers have taught in local schools from four to 30 years (mean of 12 years of teaching). There are two who are teaching in polytechnic colleges/institutes (7%), four secondary school teachers (14%), five early childhood educators (18%), 16 primary school teachers (57%), and one Curriculum Planning Officer in the Ministry of Education (4%). The ethnic composition of the respondents consist of four Indians (14%), five Malays (18%), and 19 Chinese (68%) – which is roughly reflective of the representation of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore (Ooi 2005, see above).

**Qualitative Nature of the Research**

The researchers made use of Glaser’s emergent theory approach in the qualitative framework (Creswell 2008). The themes were not prefigured but were allowed to emerge gradually from the data, a point we emphasized at the start of the paper. According to Rosenblatt (2005: 34): ‘The transactional model especially indicates the value of ethnographic or naturalistic research because it deals with problems in the context of the ongoing life of individuals and groups in a particular cultural, social, and educational environment.’
Qualitative research was used to provide a descriptive, naturalistic, and ecological approach in conducting research that examines specifics in a particular research context (Wilcox 1982), and allowed the voices of the respondents to be heard in terms of their actual experiences. Open coding was initially used to scan the FGD transcripts and open-ended questionnaires, and an iterative process of reading and re-reading was done as subsequent themes emerge from further close reading of the transcripts and qualitative responses.

Peer debriefing was conducted across all research team members to formally and informally investigate the accuracy of the researchers’ interpretation as perceived by both participants and the research group (Merrick 1999). This was done in two phases. The first phase consisted of sending the qualitative interview transcripts to the FGD facilitators to validate accuracy of transcription before the analysis was conducted. The second phase consisted of analyzing the themes generated as a result of open coding as well as the researchers’ emergent hierarchy of themes across the research team members.

Ethics and Confidentiality

The participants were given an option to participate in the study and submitted consent forms to signify their willingness to be part of the research. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any point in time during the study, and that their responses would be kept confidential and will not be used against them in any way. In this paper, letters were used to signify teacher-respondents (e.g. G, K). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board who examined and approved the research methodology for ethical considerations.
Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion was administered at the end of the course by a member of the research team (not the course instructor) to determine how teachers’ perceptions about multicultural children's books and reading have changed throughout the duration of the semester. They were asked about their understanding of multicultural picture books as well as the foreseeable benefits and challenges of using the multicultural text-sets introduced in class (see Appendix A for FGD guide).

Results and Analysis

There is a solid consensus in the group that the course has opened their minds to the power of multicultural children’s texts, especially in relation to the role of such texts in enacting change in society. Through the course, in other words, students point to a clear transformation of thinking among them about multicultural texts. For example, against the didacticism of typical materials used in the schools, the materials used in the course according to the teachers are not only wide-ranging, but they also provide non-essentialist characterization of issues, people and places through the stories from which different potential ways of looking at the world and issues emerge. One of the students succinctly captures this point:

…the materials that is provided by the Ministry, is still very didactic, as in teacher-directed. You tell the kid something, and then, do a bit of
journaling and that’s it. But for this whole course, what I learn is that through the narratives of the different books, you get the children to, put their own perspectives into it, and let them imagine, on their own, and try to put themselves in the shoes of the character, and from there, you draw out responses. I think that is very powerful, because it’s not from top down. You don’t lecture them (MS).

This point by MS is not an isolated one. In fact, it points to a history of didacticism in the teaching of values that stretches back to the 1970s when myths and folktales, for example that of the Chinese, were introduced into the national curriculum but were taught in highly prescriptive and teacher-centered ways (Gopinathan 1988: 138).

Indeed, many students do acknowledge the role of the course in opening up their minds to the potential power of multicultural texts to influence and shape people’s lives, especially those of pupils who have access to such texts in the classroom. As another student admitted, ‘prior to this course, I didn’t know that picture books were so powerful’ (K). Students also note an improved ability to evaluate the quality of children’s books because of the course, and being able to think strategically about how to encourage reading in schools, for example through relocating the library at a more accessible and visible location. As to the nature of multicultural texts, the group defines them as writings about ‘voices of the unheard, the underrepresented’ (FS), or ‘the voices of the silent, the voices of the oppressed’. In other words, the students define multicultural texts as dealing with issues of marginalization across all types of social groups. One key question, thus, about multicultural children’s books is: ‘Which voices are heard, which voices are not heard?’ (G). This political lens will in turn encourage perspective taking and critical thinking: ‘Not just one way. Various ways of looking at the book (FS)’.
However, when asked about how they choose their own books, this critical perspective about multicultural children’s texts does not figure prominently in the students’ discursive stances on classroom application. The students shift into a ‘safe’ and familiar world of discourse which dominates decision-making and practice in the classroom. Among the respondents, there is undoubtedly a sense of accomplishment in being able to confidently decide on which books may be relevant and of good quality. However, many of the choices are framed within three main considerations: first, is it a safe topic? Second, is it inspiring? And third, is it appropriate? In fact, a great deal of discussion was devoted to which topics count as appropriate and safe, with many students taking the view that only some topics are appropriate for lower primary pupils, such as bullying. G again remarked: ‘I have to start with something simpler, like bullying and kindness, that works actually’. Statements such as this assume that the nature of topics in multicultural children’s texts dictates where such texts may be taught. Moreover, the teachers tend to calibrate their newly-found ‘critical’ knowledge with what they perceive can be done in the classroom. Another student was most emphatic about these points concerning choice of texts in the classroom:

I think, no, because I’m teaching lower primary also. So I think, same thoughts with the ladies over there. I think the topics that I’ll be touching on will be on bullying, kindness. (FS4)

The problem is the persistent yet subtle skepticism among many of the respondents in the group about the viability of defining multicultural children’s books as texts about
oppression and marginalization. This is aptly captured by the following remark of one of the students:

That is about representing the voices of the silent, the voices of the oppressed. But personally I don’t find this handle, this label to be helpful…You know, to add on a label of multicultural, I find it’s, it’s, more daunting, and makes the task more difficult. That’s my personal opinion. (MS)

Thus, while the students are able to articulate clearly the critical nature of multicultural children’s books, most of them also find the ideological underpinnings of the ‘label of multicultural’ quite unnerving. Thus they slide back to essentializing topics and issues according to dominant framings in the classroom.

**Open Ended Learning Prompt**

The open-ended six-item questionnaire administered to the same group of 28 students was adapted from Gopalakrishnan’s questionnaire for teachers to determine their understanding and definition of multicultural children’s literature and the criteria that they use in selecting authentic and quality multicultural books in the classroom (see Appendix B for open-ended questionnaire). The questionnaire was also pretested with a group of higher-degree students to check whether the items were clear and coherent.

Unlike the FGD, the survey questionnaire does not probe into students’ perception of the impact of the course on their understanding of multicultural children’s literature. Similar to the
FGD, however, the students in the survey questionnaire have also been asked to define multicultural children’s literature and come up with their own criteria in using authentic and quality multicultural texts which they can use in the classroom, as well as specific suggested steps and projects which they can tap into in order to promote multiculturalism in the classroom.

**Results and Analysis**

There are recurring themes in the way respondents describe their own criteria of what counts as multicultural children’s literature, and these align with those views espoused by students in the FGD as well. Generally, they aim to transcend cultural appreciation and conceptualize such literature as being able to engage readers in new or alternative ways of understanding other cultures. Thus, it should be inclusive, multidimensional and authentic. It is inclusive because it aims to represent and validate the voices and experiences of groups and communities which have been marginalized both in literature and the society at large. As one respondent said, ‘it encompasses diversities’ in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nationality, among other categories. Thus, to quote another respondent, it promotes ‘respect for the human society, disapprove racism and discrimination, accepts and affirms the pluralism of individuals’ (S).

Thus, when asked about how they would choose authentic and quality multicultural texts for their own use, the respondents consistently aim to choose texts that do not stereotype particular groups of people. They do mention the need for the texts to be age-appropriate in terms of topics, illustrations, and use of language, but above all, good multicultural texts to most of them should provide rich representations of characters drawn from particular social groups.
They also see good texts as providing ‘genuine accounts that address issues especially those that the local children can relate’ (X) such as environment issues, the influx of foreign talents and other social problems relevant to Singapore.

According to one respondent, the question about concrete steps to make their classrooms more culturally responsive is ‘extremely complex to answer in cosmopolitan Singapore where cultural identities are subjugated by Western ideologies. Children are more familiar with Disney characters than their own cultural practices’. The respondents, thus, tend to respond to this challenge when they continue to emphasize the need to promote non-stereotypical practices in the classroom. To do this, many respondents highlight the need for them to be richly familiar with the texts of their choice, especially the cultures that the characters and stories are meant to represent. This could be because, even with texts such as folktales which draw upon familiar and predictable motifs and structures, they are still marked by their respective cultures and the changing socio-historical contexts within which they evolved over a long period of time (Tran Quynh 2009: 47). One of the most common specific steps suggested is to transform the classroom into a multicultural place through posters and pictures of people from different cultures, or through a ‘Culture Wall’ where anyone can post information, news or features about people of different backgrounds. The idea is, to quote another respondent who wants to urge positive actions through educational drama shows, letters, emails and postcards, to let students see ‘history from another point of view’ (X).

However, when asked about specific projects the respondents engage in to celebrate diversity or multiculturalism, most respondents anchor their projects (whether proposed ones or those they have carried out recently) around celebrations of multiculturalism during Racial Harmony Day, International Friendship Day and National (Singapore) Day. Consequently, such
projects are limited to promoting harmony and respect between the major racial groups in Singapore, treading nicely the official discourse of multiculturalism in the country. There are a few who focus on inter-faith relationships, for example through the making of an Interfaith Calendar featuring holy places of the various faiths and their holy days. Popular suggestions or activities relate to featuring different festivals, food, music and costumes in school, or what may simply be referred to as the 3Fs of Singapore’s multicultural education: Food, Fashion, and Festival. In other words, respondents frame their project within common tropes of multiculturalism in Singapore (see Ho 2010), but especially within those that tend to essentialize racial difference through artefacts and texts supposedly to encourage racial awareness and harmony but which, in fact, ‘heightens attention to racial difference’ (Purushotam 2000: 13). Race in this sense is a discourse that ‘is principally founded on judgmental differentiation’ (12), a point that could have been picked up by the respondents given their articulate espousal of a critical multicultural literature.

Discussion

What seems clear in the research results is the dissonance between the students’ critical appraisal of particular texts as multicultural in nature, on the one hand, and students’ ability to imagine or create new spaces of thinking and discussion about such issues in the classroom, on the other hand. In other words, the students operate within two parallel discursive worlds. One way to explain this – something discussed in the earlier section -- is the fact that in Singapore, the ‘overriding concern to ensure political stability, and the need to be sensitive to ethnic sensibilities, have produced a cautious reliance on generalities’ (Gopinathan 1988: 145, italics
supplied). That is, the specific needs of different ethnic communities and other socioeconomic groups are overridden by the ‘drive towards a cohesive society sharing a supra-ethnic set of values’ (143) which transcend what are perceived to be destructive or unhelpful social boundaries and identities.

Issues of disadvantage and oppression are defining features of noteworthy multicultural children’s texts, but they do not as yet saturate the discursive life of teachers in the classroom. In the end, what we see in the group are teachers who have felt some kind of emotional and intellectual liberation due to their newly-found realization of the power of multicultural children’s texts to change people’s lives, but such liberation barely remains relatively unaffected by the dominant ideologies of schooling. To put it in another way, the teachers betray two parallel cognitions, with one pertaining to the current dominant ways of thinking, knowing and believing, and the other pertaining to an emerging critical world of cultural discourse. They are parallel in the sense that they do not necessarily reject one in favor of the other, such that pre-existing beliefs of teachers gradually give way to new information (Tillema 1994). Rather, the teachers discursively shuttle between the two ‘developing beliefs’ (Villegas 2007) -- perhaps because of political expediency, with neither of them transforming the other.

Promoting multicultural children’s literature in the classroom as the teachers themselves define it is transgressive because it does not define ‘ethnic scripts [which] permeate all public institutions, especially schools and government-controlled grassroots organizations, and even the press’ (Goh, 2008: 244). For the teachers, applying what they have learned from their course may be understood as a kind of ‘cultural action [which] is unrecognizable’ and thus may be ‘treated with doses of state discipline’ (244). There is a very real danger lurking around if teachers go ‘out of bounds’ (see our discussion of OB markers above). However, the problem, as
mentioned earlier as well, is not just that ‘OB markers shape the limits of political discourse’ (Baildon & Sim 2009: 414) but that the list has been left unclear such that it continues to create a ‘general sense of fear, hardly definable and therefore easily challenged by the Government’ (Lim 89). As one teacher in the Baildon and Sim (2009) study poignantly contends, ‘The OB markers are markers set by ourselves in our mind’ (415).

The question here is about what the students do and plan to do with cultural discourses and multicultural education in their respective institutions. Here again we see two worlds of discourse working alongside each other: while respondents are able to define multiculturalism in terms of critical engagement between people of different socioeconomic, ethnolinguistic and gender backgrounds (among other categories), their conceptualization of concrete multicultural projects to be implemented in their respective schools or classrooms betrays a narrower understanding of multiculturalism. Not only is it reduced to multiracialism (which thus hides other cultural formations), the multicultural practices highlighted are also examples of what scholars call *surface* culture because they are mainly visible, uncontentious and uncomplicated activities (Shaules 2007). Once again, we see here how teachers deploy parallel discourses which do not quite yet intersect or collide in order to transform each other: one is an openly critical intellectual engagement with important social issues through the subject of multicultural children’s literature, and the other is a patently State-disciplined discourse that follows the dominant script of acquiescence to surface-level and superficial treatment of multiculturalism. The latter is deployed when teachers confront the realities of the classroom where the control mechanisms of the State are perceived to be operating. The teachers are comfortable with critical engagements if these are situated within individualized circumstances, for example if they are asked to define multicultural children’s literature, but they retreat to a safer discourse when they
begin to locate themselves in high-stakes ‘open’ environments such as the classroom. They fear being out of bounds, so to speak, because this would mean being perceived as anti-progress and anti-Singaporean, a point which the State has consistently impressed upon the citizenry since it became independent in the 1960.

**Conclusion**

According to Gates:

> We do not thus freely choose the discourses we embed ourselves within but to some extent are chosen by them. We become positioned by our location within and without discourses and in this way, our cognition becomes inseparable from our social practices. (Gates 2006: 355)

What we have hopefully shown through our data is that attempts to introduce critical cultural discourses in the classroom with the aim of opening wider spaces of engagement with sociocultural issues do not happen in a vacuum and may, in fact, develop a unique configuration of multiple discourses in ways that are not expected by critical multicultural pedagogy. We were able to reach this conclusion because, driven by the context-sensitive research agenda of Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS), we began with the assumption that listening to the teachers’ views and mapping out their discursive strategies would yield potentially unique findings. We thus found that, far from discrediting critical discourses or finding out ways to accommodate these discourses in their everyday life as teachers, they responded through acts of discursive
compartmentalization which are deeply embedded in a political discourse which, in turn, emerged out of Singapore’s nation-building initiatives at the time it was struggling to haul itself out of the shadows of British colonialism and its traumatic ejection from the Federation of Malay States. Such a State-defined cultural discourse produced ‘Singapore’s culture of fear’ (Tan 2009: 47) as the political leadership mythified the experiences during those turbulent early years of nation-building along the lines of the ““crisis” and “survival” motifs’ (Hill & Fee 1995: 11) in order to ‘imagine[d] a nation that is disciplined, orderly, rugged, efficient, and controlled’ (Bockhorst-Heng 1999: 235). Anyone who would be out of bounds would not only face great and real risks of being ostracized through various political mechanisms, but would also be viewed as someone who has lost touch with the founding ideals of Singapore. In this sense, critical cultural discourses are framed as dangerous Western-influenced ideas and practices because they threaten national cohesion and development.

In her own study, Ho (2010) reports that Singaporean students and teachers in the classroom rarely deviate from the official national discourse on citizenship and nationhood, and thus fails to detect critical and alternative viewpoints in classroom discussions that could have developed into a constructive dialogue on issues close to the heart of Singaporeans. In her view, ‘the state’s emphasis on consensus can thus be seen as a disciplining mechanism with which to manage public discourse on race, citizenship, and the position of minority groups’ (239).

Consequently, it becomes easier to understand how teachers in our study to some extent ‘are chosen by’ (Gates 355) the same political discourse in order to accomplish the goals of nation building as defined by the national leadership. Based on our data, the critical perspectives of teachers on multiculturalism and multicultural children’s literature do not seem to threaten the power and logic of the dominant State-defined cultural discourse. The data we have explored do
not show any deep-seated tension between these two sets of discourses as the teachers assume both to be true and correct as they deploy them as and when it is necessary and appropriate, except that, as mentioned earlier, the discourses do not really intersect. The challenge now for critically-informed pedagogies is how to help the teachers bridge their two worlds through innovative and creative activities and projects which acknowledge that indeed ‘the risks are too great’ (Lim in Tan 2009: 52) but, at the same time, would cut open a space ‘between being crushed by an antagonized strong state and laboring passively within the terms and boundaries set by an all-defining state’ (Tan 2009: 44).

‘Critical’ cultural discourses have for a long time been discouraged by the State not only because they interrogate deep-seated stereotypes but also because they are thought to have threatened the collectivist and ‘Asian’ moral and cultural fabric of Singaporean society. The challenge, therefore, is how to help teachers envision possibilities of ‘safe spaces’ (Ho 2010: 240) in the classroom while engaged in the scrutiny of multiple views and histories because it is through these kinds of conversations that a common space can be created ‘through the discovery of commonalities’. The conceptual trajectory that we propose here is, of course, the trajectory of the classroom as an everyday social reality: much has been said about critical cultural discourses as pedagogical resources, but how they are taken up in everyday classroom work by teachers and students reveals rather unique and unexpected discursive configurations.

References


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Appendix A – FGD Guide
1. What was your interest in multicultural picturebooks and how has it changed throughout the semester?

2. How useful/applicable do you believe the text-set of picture books to be in the primary classrooms? What do you foresee to be the benefits and challenges of using such a multicultural text-set in the classroom?

3. Would you be able to share some specific practices in using multicultural books in your classroom (SEL-related)?

4. Did you face any challenges (or do you foresee any challenges) in adopting the multicultural analysis of children’s books in the Singapore classroom?

5. Do you think that the multicultural picturebooks can be of use to other topics in the classroom apart from SEL? What are these?

6. How has this course changed your perception about picturebooks and SEL?

7. How are you different as a person and as a teacher from when you started this course?

8. Was there anything that hindered your ability to contribute and grow in this group?

9. Any recommendations on how the course can be further improved?

Appendix B: Open Ended Questionnaire

1. What is your understanding of multicultural children’s literature?

2. What criteria do you use to select authentic and quality multicultural books in your classroom, if at all?

3. Do you use multicultural children’s books with your students? What do you use them for?

4. What children’s books do I know that promote an understanding of the following - please include titles:
   (1) self-awareness,
   (2) self-management,
   (3) social awareness,
(4) relationship management,
(5) responsible decision making