

---

Title	Diversity, difference, equity: How student differences are socially constructed in Singapore
Author(s)	Tang T. Heng and Leonel Lim

---

Copyright © 2021 Taylor & Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Cambridge Journal of Education, on 04/05/2021, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1910204>

Diversity, Difference, Equity: How Student Differences are Socially Constructed in Singapore

Tang T. Heng & Leonel Lim

National Institute of Education-Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

How to cite: Tang T. Heng & Leonel Lim (2021) Diversity, difference, equity: how student differences are socially constructed in Singapore, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2021.1910204

## **Abstract**

Diversity is a socially constructed idea where differences are assigned values that are in turn shaped by local socio-political exigencies and narratives. Interpretations of diversity in Anglo-Saxon contexts tend to revolve around identity markers, such as race, gender, (dis)abilities, nationalities. Looking beyond Anglo-Saxon contexts, this paper examines how teachers in Singapore understand student diversity through their practices of differentiated instruction and, consequently, how these perceptions and practices engage with issues of equity. Teachers in our study interpreted student diversity primarily as academic readiness—shaped by students’ abilities, attitude, and family. These teachers’ experiences illuminate how analysing practices addressing diversity yields critical insights around dominant narratives and ideologies. In particular, findings point to a contextually-situated construction of diversity and, consequently, that understandings of equity are attuned to the national narratives of meritocracy, multiculturalism, and academic excellence in Singapore.

Keywords: diversity, difference, equity, meritocracy, social construction, Singapore

## Introduction

Educational initiatives around diversity in the United States emerged in response to the civil rights movement and consequent school desegregation efforts in the 1960s and 1970s (Banks & Banks, 2010). Many such initiatives then were premised upon Kallen's (1924) concept of cultural pluralism that privileges the rights of each ethnic group to achieve an equitable and socially just society (Bennett, 2001). Multiculturalism, consequently, has often been used interchangeably with diversity (Ghosh, 2018). Expanding beyond ethnicity and cultural paradigms, contemporary conceptions of diversity have since been enlarged by U.S. scholars to include other identity markers—such as gender, language, class, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status, exceptionalism, mental and physical ability, religion, geography, and youth culture—with these markers recurring throughout education textbooks and articles addressing diversity (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2002; Gollnick & Chinn, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lawson, 2013; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Despite important differences in how scholarship conceptualizes diversity, collectively this body of work documents the ways social categories, meanings and relations are created and sustained (often not unproblematically) by dominant social relations and ideologies in Anglo-Saxon countries<sup>1</sup>, particularly the United States (Lawson, 2013). With globalization and the movement of educational ideas across contexts, such conceptions of diversity have travelled beyond the United States, gaining increasing resonance in these new spaces and being subjected to a host of (re)articulations. At the same time, an emerging body of scholarship from Asia has focused on documenting how diversity is constructed, revealing departures from Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Given the centrality of Anglo-Saxon diversity discourses and emerging literature (re)articulating diversity in Asia that we hope to grow, this paper explores how teachers in Singapore understand student diversity through their practices of differentiated instruction and, consequently, how these perceptions and practices engage with issues of

---

<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Saxon countries share common characteristics, such as the English language, political beliefs, and historical ties with the U.K. However, we recognise that they are not a homogenous group given their different geographies and historical developments. Further, given the level of attention directed to diversity in the U.S. (Mills, 2008), we acknowledge the U.S.-centric perspectives in this article and have attempted to include literature from other countries, like Canada and Australia, wherever possible.

equity. We show how diversity is differently interpreted by these teachers as they work to recognize students' differences in ways that are themselves circumscribed by a set of national ideologies around meritocracy and multiculturalism. In doing so, we aim to highlight how diversity is a situated idea and expand its conceptions beyond conventional articulations in Anglo-Saxon countries.

### **Constructing diversity**

Diversity is a socially constructed and valued idea where meanings are assigned to group differences typically via the various identity markers mentioned above (Ghosh, 2018; Lawson, 2013; Swartz, 2009). Difference, in itself, pertains only to the quality of variance. For instance, sex is a difference that carries deep implications only when being male or female is catalogued, hierarchized, and evaluated and contributes to prejudicial and discriminatory behaviours. In other words, 'it is not the differences in themselves, but the social construction and conceptualization of these differences that divide people' (Ghosh, 2018, p. 20). Contemplating diversity as a *social construction* thus necessitates a scrutiny of the context within which diversity is invoked; history, politics, economics, culture, society, and education shape and are shaped by the construction of social meanings, giving unique interpretations of diversity in various contexts. To illustrate, diversity in India tends to allude to caste, class, religion, and language differences given the influence of a Brahmanical society and colonial legacies (Ghosh, 2018). In East Asian countries like Hong Kong (Bhowmik, 2018; Chang, 2018; Jackson, 2018), Japan (Doerr, 2020; Tsuneyoshi, 2018), and Korea (Chang, 2017; Jo & Jung, 2017), diversity appears most commonly associated with ethnic or cultural differences. Yet, ethnic or cultural differences are recontextualised in each of these countries vis-à-vis local peculiarities. For instance, many South Asian minorities who sink their roots into Hong Kong after involuntary migration prompted by the British struggle with integration into a society that increasingly defines itself as Han Chinese (Bhowmik, 2018; Chang, 2018; Jackson, 2018). On the other hand, Japanese returnees are deemed diverse by the Japanese society even though they share the same racial phenotype (Tsuneyoshi, 2018). Japanese returnees are considered diverse for speaking very little Japanese and being unfamiliar with Japanese customs and behaviours, given their

long residence overseas. In the case of Singapore, diversity carries the inflections of race, language, and religion, given its post-independence efforts in building a cohesive nation of immigrants from China, Malay Peninsula, Riau Archipelago, South Asia, and Europe, to name a few (Chua, 2003). Diversity, hence, acquires unique meanings in different contexts. This small but growing body of research documenting how diversity has been interpreted in Asia—to which our research aims to contribute—is critical to expanding and decentring the discourse on diversity.

Understanding diversity as a social construction thus begets problematizing how it is constructed, for what purposes, and in line with what ideologies. Dominant discourses around diversity have been critiqued for assuming a deficit perspective: diversity is typically seen vis-à-vis the mainstream and defined as variance from the taken-for-granted and dominant positions and practices (Castro, 2010; Lawson, 2013; Swartz, 2009). In reviewing research on diversity and teacher education, Ladson-Billings (1999) observed that, diversity ‘is that ‘thing’ that is other than White and middle class’ (p. 219), just as Castro (2010) reported deficit views in research on preservice teachers’ beliefs of diversity. Likewise, teachers and teacher education programs in modern Anglo-Saxon societies are seen as addressing diversity in superficial and additive ways that trivialize the powerful cultural and social differences across students and their families. Studies across Australia (Hollinsworth, 2016; Mills, 2008), Canada (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008), England (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008), and the U.S. (Castro, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006) found that, while teachers’ notions of diversity may differ across these contexts, White, middle-income, and English-language speaking teachers struggled with acknowledging cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic perspectives different from their own.

Extending this line of critique, Swartz (2009) argues that diversity is a ‘hegemonic discourse’ (p. 1045) where difference from Anglo-Saxon and patriarchal ways of being is interpreted ‘as deficit, as divisive, and as illegitimate.’ Similarly, Lawson (2013) observes that policy discourse in England references ‘difference from the norm’ (p. 108) through deficit lens. The long centring of knowledge production in Western countries gives rise to ideas being defined and systems of reference/classification

benchmarked against their imprimaturs (Hall, 1992; Lim & Apple, 2016; Yiu, 2019; Yuan et al., 2020); this masks cultural biases and geopolitical contestations and legitimates purportedly neutral and acontextual ways of thinking, knowing, and framing. Indeed, given how diversity is contextually-entrenched and much of its scholarship rooted in Anglo-Saxon onto-epistemological assumptions of norms, values and methods (Lim, Tan & Saito, 2019; Mills, 2008; Yuan et al., 2020), this study seeks to expand our understandings of diversity by exploring how teachers in Singapore understand diversity through their practices of differentiated instruction, a pedagogical approach that, as we outline below, foregrounds issues of diversity and equity.

### ***Diversity and equity: pedagogical approaches***

Pedagogical approaches that centre on diversity invariably privilege equity (Bennett, 2001). Equity in education means providing opportunities for all students to achieve their fullest potential with efforts directed to removing structural injustices around dimensions of equity, like class, gender, and race. Amongst the numerous pedagogical approaches<sup>2</sup> centring on diversity and equity, multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 2009) and culturally relevant education (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2002) are, arguably, most common. In short, these approaches encourage educators to reflect on their values and beliefs of marginalised students and include them in their teaching practices. The assumption is that teachers first need to recognize diversity so that student differences can be integrated and provided for (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). These diversity/equity-driven approaches share further commonalities: i. appreciation for student diversity, ii. integration of students' lives and concerns into the curriculum, iii. emphasis on a teacher-student relationship that is less hierarchical and more equitable, iv. critical consciousness of how structural and institutional forces perpetuate social injustice and inequities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Bennett, 2001).

---

<sup>2</sup> Given the limits of this article, we draw examples from a few representative approaches to advance our arguments. For an overview of more scholars, see, for example, Aronson & Laughter, 2016 and Bennett, 2001.

The political philosopher Nancy Fraser's (2003) concepts of recognition and redistribution can deepen our understanding of how such pedagogical approaches promote equity. Briefly, recognition demands cognizance of different identities or groups within a society, while redistribution involves (re-)allocation of resources between groups. By appreciating student diversity and expanding the critical consciousness of both teachers and students, teachers are recognizing how students' identities can be marginalized and their economic/material injustices institutionalized, thus according them cultural and symbolic justice<sup>3</sup>. By integrating students' lives in the curriculum and fostering a less hierarchical teacher-student relationship, teachers are redistributing resources (e.g. curricular materials) and power (e.g. epistemic and relational authority), thus according them socio-economic justice. Fraser's ideas carry powerful insights for critical scholars writ large and have recently begun to find their way into research around diversity and pedagogy (see for example Lim & Tan, 2018; Lingard & Mills, 2007).

While much of the academic scholarship and professional discourse around differentiated instruction (DI) has not always foregrounded notions of equity, recent interpretations have begun to address how equity issues relate to DI (Santamaria, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014). DI is an educational approach most commonly associated with University of Virginia's scholar Carol Tomlinson (2001) and that has gained popularity beyond the United States (Heng & Song, In press). DI is premised upon the ideals that diversity is a strength, all students can succeed academically, teachers are responsible for maximizing every student's progress, and barriers denying access to excellence need to be removed (Tomlinson, 2014). Diversity and equity are foregrounded, as with concepts of recognition and redistribution, since DI requires teachers to modify curricula, pedagogy, resources, tasks and environment to honour differences and maximize each student's learning opportunity and capacity. What distinguishes DI, perhaps, from other pedagogical frameworks is the systematic breakdown of philosophies, principles,

---

<sup>3</sup> Symbolic justice is the honour and prestige accorded to a group based on other markers, e.g. wealth, experience, for compensatory purposes. For instance, veterans are deemed to be accorded symbolic justice through the celebration of Veterans Day in the U.S.



classroom elements (content, process, product, affect, learning environment), student differences (their readiness, interests, learning and learner profiles<sup>4</sup>), and instructional strategies in addition to the use of assessment to inform teaching and learning.

Given its methodical and explicit pedagogical approach, teachers in Singapore have recently embraced DI to address increasing diversity in schools (Heng & Fernandez, 2016; Heng & Song, 2020). Singapore experienced a 11% point increase in non-resident population between 2005 and 2019 that saw the 29.4% non-resident population comprising a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities consequently reflected in schools (Department of Statistics, 2019). In 2020, DI was officially earmarked as one of six professional development areas teachers reportedly need to support diversifying classrooms and new policies, of most relevance being the move towards destreaming (Heng & Song, In press; Ministry of Education, 2020). Exploring how teachers in Singapore implement DI thus allows us to understand the contextualized meaning and valuation of differences in a socio-historical-political-educational-economic context that, as we show below, departs from Anglo-Saxon countries.

### ***Multiculturalism and meritocracy in Singapore***

Singapore is arguably one of the most culturally diverse Asian cities. Since independence in 1965, multiculturalism has been enshrined in its national ideology and policies. Singapore's national pledge states that '*regardless of race, language or religion, (emphasis added)*' all citizens are 'one united people' who 'build a democratic society, based on justice and *equality (emphasis added)*.' Its resident population, forming 70.9% of the 5.6 million in the city state, is categorized into four main groups: Chinese (74%), Malay (13%), Indian (9%), and other ethnic groups (3%), or CMIO for short (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2018). While adopted by the post-independence founding government as an expedient way to manage differences and build national identity amongst a young country of diverse immigrants,

---

<sup>4</sup> In this study, *learning* profile is defined as students' preferred approaches to learning (e.g. by visualizing or listening, or individually or in groups) while *learner* profile is defined as the experiences, prior knowledge, values, and identities that students hold (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality, family background, etc.) (Tomlinson, 2014).

multiculturalism has become widely accepted in governance policies as well as both official and private discourses (Ho, 2009; Lian, 2016). For instance, the National Education program was launched in 1997 to cultivate national cohesion, identity, and survival instincts amongst the young by emphasizing Singapore's core values of *meritocracy*, *multiculturalism*, and multireligionism (HistorySG, 2014; Loh, 2014). These values are inculcated through celebrations like the annual Racial Harmony Day (where students dress up in ethnic costumes and learn about different cultures) and a new social studies curriculum emphasizing citizenship education. Pervasive as Singapore's multiculturalism policies have been, various scholars have critiqued the policies for erasing differences that fall within the interstices of the CMIO grouping and have also pointed to how out-of-bounds markers—unwritten censorship guidelines imposed by governing officials—continue to shape how sensitive topics around race and religion are being discussed (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011; Chua, 2003; Lian, 2016). Further, while multiculturalism is enshrined in Singapore's ideology and policies, multicultural education has never been mainstreamed as scholars observed that state-sanctioned diversity markers constrained an exploration of the wider range of identity markers embedded in multicultural education (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011).

Although there has been published work on how diversity is managed at a policy level (Chua, 2003; Lian, 2016; Mathews, 2015), comparatively less literature exists on how diversity is negotiated by teachers in the quotidian life of schools and classrooms. Ninety-five percent of preschool teachers surveyed saw multiculturalism only in terms of race (Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011). Alviar-Martin and Ho (2011) and Lim and Tan (2018) found that teachers in Singapore approached diversity using state-sanctioned categories like race, language, and religion, and struggled with engagement in controversial issues or viewpoints in opposition to the state's. Specifically, Alviar-Martin and Ho reported that even though a handful of teachers were cognizant of diversities such as sexuality, teachers found state-mandated events like Racial Harmony Day 'shallow' and 'cosmetic' (p. 132), and were critical of the CMIO model, they stayed within 'party line...[and] acknowledged the delimiting influence that policies

such as the Sedition Act had on their teaching' (p. 133). While teachers in Alviar-Martin and Ho's study saw multicultural education as understanding other peoples and cultures (but recognized the need to transcend the superficiality), teachers in Lim and Tan's study were actively engaged in the equity work of recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 2003). Both studies demonstrated that teachers are simultaneously working with and against the state's categories of diversity understood through the ideology of meritocracy. Likewise, both studies attributed the constriction of a more expansive view of diversity to the meritocratic discourse pervading Singapore.

The notion of meritocracy as it is articulated in Singapore deserves elaboration. Meritocracy complements multiculturalism as Singapore's founding ideologies given how meritocracy's emphasis on non-discrimination promises a level-playing field on which all are *equal* to compete (Koh, 2014; Lim & Tan, 2018; Tan, 2008). The founding leaders of Singapore argued that being resource poor and tiny (581.5 km<sup>2</sup>), Singapore can only rely on human capital; thus, education was co-opted as both a social-leveller and driver of Singapore's survival, economic growth and unity (Gopinathan & Mardiana, 2013). Consequently, academic merit—seen as objective and non-discriminatory—has been used as the primary yardstick in determining rewards that include (but are not limited to) enrolment in more advanced academic tracks in secondary schools, admission to elite schools, access to government scholarships, and, consequently, prestigious jobs and higher incomes, among other rewards. (Gopinathan & Mardiana, 2013; Lim, 2013; Lim & Apple, 2015). Academic merit, therefore, is a 'positional good' (Kwek et al., 2019, p. 90) that enhances social mobility via differential access to resources (e.g. specific schools, academic subjects). Ironically, while often used to emphasize the state's commitment to equality and difference, meritocracy has also been criticized for 'constraining policy efforts at developing a discourse of difference, and elaborating on how that difference—racial/ethnic, religious customs, linguistic, class, etc.—both provides motivation for students and also accounts for the unique challenges they face in school' (Lim & Tan, 2018, p. 5). As Alviar-Martin and Ho (2011) found, an uncritical subscription to meritocracy stifled teachers' adoption of (more creative and nuanced forms of) multicultural education in

Singapore. Even though some teachers are critical of the national narrative around meritocracy, their perceived lack of alternative paradigms has them conceding to its necessity (Ho, 2020).

The paucity of research—to which this paper responds—in understanding the social and institutional conditions that construct student differences carries important consequences. For one, without a nuanced understanding of the experiences and struggles of different students, the very system of meritocracy might fail them (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Lim & Tan, 2018). Further, meritocratic assumptions of a level playing field evacuate an examination of how structural, institutional, and cultural mechanisms shape students' lives and learning. Finally, standardized national exams, touted as an unbiased instrument for measuring academic merit, perpetuate pedagogical instrumentality and epistemic monopoly amongst teachers as they view highly-scripted/transmissive teaching as most efficient, and their knowledge most important, in achieving students' academic outcomes (Heng, Song & Tan, 2021; Hogan et al., 2013; Kwek et al., 2019). Bearing in mind the particularities of the Singapore context, we turn our attention to understanding how teachers in Singapore interpret student differences via their DI practices.

## **Methodology**

This study is part of a larger one investigating how ten teachers in Singapore implemented DI between 2018 and 2019 and draws on a subset of data related to teachers' engagement with student differences. Participants were either nominated by faculty colleagues or school principals to have some experience in practicing DI. Ten participants (five primary and five secondary teachers) from ten different public schools in Singapore were recruited by criterion sampling for representation in nationally-examinable teaching subjects (English, Mathematics and Science), school level (primary and secondary), teaching experience (over two years), and gender (see Table 1). Only public school teachers were included as all but a handful of Singaporean students attend public schools. Recruiting ten participants afforded us the chance to work with both primary and secondary teachers and distribute them across the

three examinable subjects, while simultaneously ensuring the participant number is small enough for us to understand their experiences in-depth and manage logistics.

We drew upon a qualitative research approach by observing participants in their naturalistic setting, interviewing them several times, and engaging them in member checks to paint a fuller picture of their experiences from their perspectives (Hatch, 2002). Participants completed an online background questionnaire and three interviews (one each at the beginning and end of 2018, another in 2019). The beginning-of-2018 interview sought to understand participants' teaching and learning philosophy, as well as elicited their views around DI and student differences. The end-of-2018 interview sought participants' insights of—and their extent of agreement with—patterns we observed across 39 lesson observations cycles. Interview data from 2019 was omitted as it served another purpose.

We conducted 39 lesson observation cycles over 2018: each cycle included a pre-lesson observation interview, classroom observation and post-lesson observation interview. (All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.) During observations, we kept observation logs detailing minute-by-minute teacher practices, including their conversations, questions, and interactions with students. After each lesson observation cycle, two researchers independently used data from the observation log and pre-/post-observation interviews to complete a rating sheet with descriptors based on the five principles of DI outlined by Tomlinson (2014): i. environment that encourages and supports learning, ii. quality curriculum, iii. assessment that informs teaching and learning, iv. instruction that responds to student variance, and v. leading students and managing routines. These principles were not used as evaluations but rather as an analytic and descriptive framework to capture the different emphasis in which teachers engage in DI. The researchers met thereafter to derive consensus ratings from a scale of 0 (no evidence) to 3 (strong evidence). These ratings were averaged across the 39 observations of 10 participants and reported below in parenthesis as evidence to support specific observations. Given the small number of participants, the consensus ratings are not meant to be generalized beyond these ten participants. Instead, the consensus ratings allowed us to summarise patterns in practices across these ten participants and,

more importantly, clarify with them during the year-end interview to what extent they agreed with the patterns and why. By ‘embedding’ (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2017, p. 140)—i.e. using a secondary method of quantitative rating in our qualitative research—we were able to engage in member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of our observations (Shenton, 2004) and better reflect participants’ perspectives.

As this study draws from a larger data set, we focused our analysis on the subset of relevant interview data, like participants’ responses to questions on how they viewed student differences, to what extent they agreed with the observation patterns, and their interpretations for the patterns. We used an inductive approach to analyse interview data—letting codes emerge—rather than using pre-figured codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) during the constant comparison process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This approach allowed for ‘what is’ to surface from the data, avoiding the imposition of pre-fabricated, western-centric identity markers that may not be commensurate with the idiosyncrasies of the Singaporean context<sup>5</sup>. For instance, in analysing participants’ views of how students were different, recurring codes like ‘single family’ ‘family background/support’ were grouped under ‘family’ while ‘mindset,’ ‘disposition,’ and ‘motivation’ were grouped under ‘attitude’—to honour participants’ perspectives. Additional ways in which trustworthiness was enhanced in the data analysis process included comparing data across the interviews, lesson observations and analytic memos as well as having two researchers conduct data analysis separately before comparing the results (Shenton, 2004).

## **Findings**

Participants understood differences mainly in terms of ‘ability’, ‘family’, and ‘disposition’, revealing an overriding concern for academic readiness. We observed that when participants implemented DI in the classroom, they seldom centred on students’ needs or differences. When participants recognized or made attempts to address student differences, difference was primarily seen as academic readiness.

---

<sup>5</sup> We are indebted to Reviewer 2 for these insights.

Participants alluded to concepts like meritocracy and, relatedly, multiculturalism, equality, fairness, and institutional forces to justify their perception of student differences.

### *Diversity as Academic Readiness*

In the first interview, conducted prior to lesson observations, we asked participants to articulate three important differences they see across students. Even though the question was deliberately left open-ended as ‘important differences across students,’ participants’ responses revealed their unconscious preference towards learning and academic outcomes. Participants’ top three answers clustered around ‘ability,’ ‘attitude,’ and ‘family,’ with five participants citing ‘ability’/‘attitude’ and seven ‘family.’ They defined ability as ‘aptitude... if they [students] grasp things quickly and can do many things at once [in class],’ and explained that ‘some just need more time to pick up something, some can pick it up at the snap of my fingers’ (Jon). Some participants associated ‘the ability in the mind to get or not get it’ (Stella) to students’ ‘nature,’ alluding to an essentialised, fixed quality and symptomatic of the larger social discourse around merit as requiring combination of innate talent (Jiang, 2016) and, as we see in what follows, effort.

Participants construed ‘attitude’ as various constructs that relate to one’s psychological disposition or strength, like effort or will, and argued that good attitudes lead to positive academic outcomes. Matilda explained that ‘it’s not just their [students’] academic ability but whether they are willing to put in effort.’ Effort is perceived as students having ‘determination’ or ‘the will’ vs. a ‘mindset of giving up.’ Several participants also alluded to whether students have ‘motivation... attitude towards learning,’ explaining that ‘there are pupils who are just very motivated to do something [succeeding academically]... and [others] don’t budge’ (Ping). Finally, participants saw family as its composition, e.g., ‘single parent’ vs. ‘solid nuclear families,’ ‘support from parents’ and values they instil that shape students’ academic learning. They shared that ‘some kids come in advantaged... [as] they have been propped up by mother or father or tuition,’ (Matilda) while others are ‘latchkey’ children whose ‘parents are busy working...they have issues at home,’ (Zia) thus the differences in students’ academic readiness. Further, the ‘ones who

tend to do well are the ones who come from parents who, regardless of social status, have a deep sense of value. They may not be very educated, but they will nag their kid [to study]' (Sharon); in other words, parental valuation of academics is more important than socio-economic status in influencing students' academic readiness and, consequently, outcomes. Interestingly, family, as a difference, is viewed vis-à-vis the amount of academic support they give to their children, not other aspects, like their culture, or emotional closeness.

When highlighting differences such as 'ability', 'attitude', and 'family', participants discussed these differences in relation to academic readiness: i.e., whether students had the 'ability' to learn (or not), and how quickly they could learn; or, whether students (or their parents) had the right attitude towards learning and put any effort into it. Despite the open-ended nature of the question—'what are three important differences you see across students'—that participants' responses gravitated towards differences associated with academic readiness, revealed what is privileged by them and, the larger society (as we unveil further below).

### ***Recognizing and Redistributing Difference***

During classroom observations, we found that participants seldom tailored instruction or curriculum to students' needs or differences. Participants showed almost no to weak evidence of differentiating instruction along student readiness, interest, learning or learner profile, suggesting low engagement in the act of *recognition and redistribution* (Fraser, 2003) in class and high epistemic monopoly by teachers (Hogan et al., 2013). Similarly, we noticed a weak to moderate appreciation of each student as an individual and observed that only a handful of participants offered choice, an approach Tomlinson (2014) recommends for centring and empowering students. Alfian's<sup>6</sup> explanation for why he does not offer choice to some students implicitly reflects deficit and fixed perspectives around some students' abilities and disappointment at other students' motivations or family structures:

---

<sup>6</sup> Pseudonym used for all participants.



Some of them [lower academic track students] in terms of their backgrounds, some of them are really good ...if I were to give them a choice to do... they'll be motivated and they can do it on their own. But students who come from households that are not very structured, even if I give them a structure and level of independence, it would be chaos, erm, it's very difficult for me to trust them.

Other participants explained that students 'don't know what they want' or that it is a 'waste of time' as 'teacher-centred approach... takes up less time' (Jon).

Further, the enacted classroom curriculum held little relevance to students' lives, as observation ratings of 1.1 indicate weak evidence of this phenomenon. Participants seldom explained how curriculum content and skills related to students' lives or invited them to share insights and materials from their lives in class. Instead, they tended to exhort students to learn using an exam rhetoric like, 'look at this formula, it's the easiest to score... it's three marks... a high value question' (Sharon). These examples point to teacher-centred practices where relational equity, by means of greater sharing of student ownership in curriculum and instruction (or, redistribution), is scant, echoing existing insights around the predominance of transmissive teaching and pedagogical instrumentality amongst Singapore teachers (Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2009; Hogan et al., 2013).

Where participants attended to student differences in the classroom, it was primarily via academic readiness, reflecting how their beliefs (as revealed in the first interview above) aligned with their practices. The most common way by which participants formally assessed students and tailored instruction to student variance was by considering learner readiness. To illustrate, they used assessment to determine academic readiness (e.g. issued diagnostic worksheets), allocated tiered assignments (i.e. gave more challenging tasks to more academically-ready students), and paid more attention to less academically-ready students (Jon: 'I help this group more because they're weaker'). Participants almost never used formal or informal assessments to understand student interest (0.1<sup>7</sup>), learning profile (0.2) or

---

<sup>7</sup> Derived from an average of all classroom observation ratings, with scores scaled from 0 (no evidence) to 3 (strong evidence).

learner profile (0.1). These close to zero scores reflect almost no evidence of participants engaging in these actions and reflect how little emphasis participants paid to, using Fraser's (2003) term, *recognizing* students' interest, learning and learner profile in the classroom. When participants adjusted their instruction to students' differences, or, in other words, engaged in *redistribution* (Fraser, 2003), students' readiness was most commonly addressed (0.9), followed by interest (0.6), learning profile (0.4), and learner profile (0.2). That learner profile—aspects such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, home background—was, again, below one (weak evidence) and close to zero (no evidence) suggests how differences were rarely seen along these lines; instead, student differences was chiefly associated with academic readiness.

### ***Meritocracy, Diversity and Equity***

Ideas of meritocracy and, relatedly, multiculturalism, equality, fairness, and institutional forces surfaced as constraints participants faced when they were asked why teachers primarily saw student differences as 'academic readiness' and rarely addressed social and cultural differences in the lessons we observed. To begin, participants felt that addressing other types of student differences, especially via assessments, would go against the grain of meritocracy:

The idea of meritocracy, means that everyone has to be *given the same things* [emphasis added] whether or not they are able to perform. It's really up to them, it's their ability... I mean you and I are given the same things, so if you cannot perform then maybe it's because you're not working hard enough, or you're just lazy. (Alfan)

The idea that students should be 'given the same things' echoed across participants' responses as they shared that students and parents have the mindset of 'fair as equal.' Participants explained the purpose and place of standardized assessments in a meritocratic (and hierarchical) society:

PSLE...O levels, or A levels [examples of standardized national exams]... they are not differentiated....The society is made up of many different levels.... grading is an important thing to be able to sift out the different individuals to fit the different roles for society... It's

not the best, it's not the most practical either, but at the moment it's probably the only viable one that is the most easy to craft and to assess and there is no new solution to that yet. (Adel)

By giving students an 'equal playing field' via examinations, participants argued that outcomes (or merit) can be 'quantified' and measured against an 'objective baseline.' Fairness or equity—i.e., 'Every child is given the same, regardless of their race or nationality' (Adel)—participants rationalized, is achieved when students have the same content, learning process, and tasks in the classroom.

Additionally, given meritocracy's focus on non-discrimination among the different races and its inextricable link to multiculturalism in Singapore, Matilda divulged that to talk about other kinds of differences, for instance cultural differences, would put teachers at risk of being called 'racist' by their students given the sensitivities of such topics in Singapore.

Author1: We also noticed that differences are rarely discussed in the classroom.

Matilda: Oh ya. Sensitive.

Author1: Why?

Matilda: Because Singapore very sensitive....

Author1: What about something cultural?

Matilda: Then they say, Madam, you so racist [sic].

Author1: Why can't we have this kind of discussions in class?

Matilda: Because we don't have this kind of discussions in real life, because we're very conscious of not offending. And we really don't know how other people will interpret what we say.

Together with other similarly-focused research in Singapore, we find that teachers in our studies are working with the national narrative of meritocracy (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2016; Ho, 2020; Lim & Tan, 2018). Meritocracy appears to constrain a 'discourse of difference' (Lim & Tan, 2018, p. 5) as evident by participants' discourses like 'fair as equal,' exams as 'objective,' and discussing differences as 'racist.'

When asked why teachers saw student differences primarily along academic abilities, participants ascribed it to a success-as-academic-merit mindset and the intimate relationship this mindset has with history, economics, assessment and the accountability culture in Singapore.

Author1: Why do you think we are so results driven?

Alfan: ....Our Singapore society has been defined and constructed [this way] ever since our independence...we have only our manpower to rely on, because of limited resources, we need to achieve maximum efficiency for our students....but eventually when the economy progressed ... the focus has changed. Now we're talking about values driven education.... So, there are efforts by CPDD [education ministry's curriculum development department] to actually incorporate... 21st century skills... the intention is good, but they haven't quite realized that society hasn't quite moved on with the times, because we are still obsessed with the paper chase. Even the teachers also felt that, a measure of their own competency...is defined as a success of students.

Participants observed that students have been inculcated with the mindset that they 'come to school, understand what is being taught, do well in exams and go on to the next level of education.' Stella ruminated that because 'we have intense pressure for academic excellence, the national exam.... We want to make sure that the students reach the highest potential, in that sense, the report card, the grade, we want to help them achieve'. Since success is defined in terms of academic merit and 'exams are quite a big thing,' participants saw it as their responsibility to help students score their best grades within the exam-oriented system. Meng Yong went as far as to admit that the 'wider character development... it's been sacrificed' in the pursuit of academic abilities and excellence. In addition, participants alluded to the 'accountability culture' where 'the teacher is held accountable for the performance of the class' and pointed out that their 'work review' and 'performance bonus' are pegged to their students' performances.

Author1: ...Why do you think teachers tend to, let's say in the assignments that they design or in the pedagogical process that they use, they care more about the different abilities or readiness of the students rather than ... interests or their learning profiles?

Jon: .... performance apportion plays a bigger role, because when we're being assessed, we can get a C-, we can get a D and that will affect promotional prospects....Results still matter, because everybody has their own professional reputation to uphold, nobody wants to be known as the teacher who cannot procure results.

Participants' insights reveal how Singapore's nation-building narratives, economics, and assessment and accountability culture interact to exert pressures on teachers to focus primarily on academic merit and reduce learning and student outcomes to academic achievement, or grades. Academic

merit is seen by teachers as a ‘positional good’ (Kwek, Miller & Manzon, 2019, p. 90) that not only helps students progress but also validates teachers’ professional standing.

## Discussion

This paper aims to document how teachers in Singapore understand student diversity through their practices of differentiated instruction and, consequently, how their understanding and practices engage with issues of equity. In focusing on a particular—and partial—set of students’ needs and differences and justifying these vis-à-vis a host of contextual exigencies in Singapore, the teachers in the study were (re)articulating Fraser’s ideas around recognition and redistribution. When student differences are recognized, addressed, and *valued*, attention to *diversity* is mainly seen as varying academic readiness. Concerns with issues of race, class, language—examples of diversity markers more commonly raised in Anglo-Saxon scholarship—were absent within our study. Further, unlike the social studies teachers in Alviar-Martin and Ho’s (2011) study, or the carefully-selected teachers who demonstrated culturally relevant pedagogy in Lim and Tan’s (2018) study, regular teachers in our study mostly focused on academic readiness and rarely addressed state-sanctioned markers like race, language and religion. Even interest, an aspect that is arguably less contentious, is marginalized. In primarily privileging academic readiness through DI, these teachers are performing the role expected of them in an examination-oriented and academic-merit-as-talent culture; they are considered responsible—by parents, students, their superiors—only if they can help students acquire academic outcomes and, eventually, social mobility (Koh, 2014; Kwek, Miller & Manzon, 2019; Lim & Tan, 2018). Indeed, as Ball’s (2003) work on performativity reminds us, under cultures of heightened regulation and accountability, teachers’ ‘performances’ of their work or displays of ‘good practices’ often critically involve both elements of acquiescence and resistance. The teachers in this study interpreted equity as helping students ‘do well in exams and go on to the next level of education’ amidst the ‘harsh reality’ of society, revealing a tighter, more circumscribed construction of equity in comparison to Anglo-Saxon discourses (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Bennett, 2001).

Participants' conceptualization of academic readiness as a mix of 'ability,' 'attitude' and 'family' suggests an unconscious and predominant inclination to reduce differences to an individual or familial level, divorced from larger cultural, societal, institutional and structural forces. Teachers appear to hold unconscious perceptions of student differences as psychologized and individualized (e.g., 'ability' 'attitude') without interrogating how structures/institutions/cultures shape students' learning, echoing the findings of extant literature (Jiang, 2016; Lim & Tan, 2018). Blame (for academic and social 'failings') becomes privatized at the individual or familial level, reflecting Alfian's earlier observation of how the meritocratic ideology displaces responsibilities on the individual. The logic and consequence of subscribing to meritocracy and non-discriminatory policies appears to result in the ranking of students' differences in terms of academic merit and, as Chua (2018) points out, the creation of an 'academic aristocracy' at the peak who bequeaths hidden advantages to their charges.

To be fair, participants exhibited some awareness of students' social and cultural differences and sought ways to address them by working against the national narrative of meritocracy, mirroring teachers in other studies (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2016; Ho, 2020; Lim & Tan, 2018). Some shared about how children from 'different nationalities... may not be familiar with what you're [they are] trying to say [in the classroom],' and that students 'come to class with their own unique set of experiences or even emotional well-being' which demands their attention. Some articulated oft-heard stereotypes around cultural differences shaping students' classroom participation ('Indians are very vocal... Malay students are inward... very shy') that need attention. Many made an effort to gather student feedback about their teaching or carved out time to know students individually, e.g., chatting with students in the cafeteria to reduce the teacher-student hierarchy. Some disclosed tensions between taking time out to address non-ability-related student differences vs. helping students achieve academic success, as Sharon shared:

I face a dilemma because on one hand we are trying to move towards joy of learning [new education policy reducing school-based assessments]... to have students find joy in learning rather than just study for grades...on the other hand you have the harsh reality .... whether

they [students] have the opportunity in their post-secondary education, really rely on the numbers [examination scores].... So, how do you balance that?

Further, participants were not blind to the fallibilities of meritocracy. Alfian observed that ‘unfairness is actually hidden’ and Peng pointed out that ‘the playing field in education is not level to begin with, given students’ different ‘head start[s]’:

Education no longer seems to be a very level playing field although we say that it is. We value meritocracy but that's not how it's working. So people place a premium in preschool markets.... You pay a premium, your child would be getting a better education.

Yet, participants rationalized that it was only realistic for students to be aware that ‘not everyone in society is equal’, just as Peng rued that academic merit as a benchmark will have to stay for now because ‘I don’t think anyone has come up with that system [fair way of judging merit] yet. If they have I'm sure quite a few countries would have jumped on it and tried it.’

Participants’ insights reflect a complicated—even contradictory—relationship they have with student diversity and merit. While they acknowledged the flaws of meritocracy and try to work around it, given the pressures and dominant discourses that surround their work, they continue to enact their parts in the ‘charade of meritocracy’ (Barr, 2006). It was therefore not surprising that many of them eventually reverted to a pedagogical instrumentality and exam-centred instruction that, as other scholars have observed, remain deep-seated in the Singapore classroom (Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2009; Hogan et al., 2013; Kwek et al., 2019). Participants’ tensions in navigating meritocracy reflect Singapore’s. Meritocracy in Singapore involves the coupling of a set of competing ideals around elitism (merit) and egalitarianism (multiculturalism): the need to develop the best in individuals with different rewards or resources and also the need for non-discrimination. The latter focus on non-discrimination leads into a bracketing of ‘extraneous’ factors associated with diversity, such as race, class, and in this case, interest, in the isolation of merit. In the education system, this consequently results in a singular focus on academic readiness (as merit). While it has been criticised that the focus on academic readiness reproduces inequality, what is worth noting, in the case of Singapore, is that inequality finds itself nestled

within a deeper set of ideas around meritocracy and the contradictory ideals around elitism/inequality and egalitarianism/equality it speaks to (Lim, 2013).

In light of the above discussions around socio-political exigencies and narratives, it is pertinent to recognize that the notion of diversity is situated within the larger (or dominant) context and is, thus, a relational concept. We tend to associate terms like ‘diverse’ or ‘diversity’ with various identity markers and assume these markers illuminate what the terms mean. However, findings above reveal that diversity-related terms need to be scrutinized vis-à-vis the dominant discourse, underscoring the relational nature and contextual sensitivity of the terms. Analysing how diversity is defined may also yield more pointed insights about the dominant than marginalized. In our study, student differences are seen in relation towards learning and academic outcomes, reflecting dominant societal perspectives around the desirability of academic merit. Students/parents/families that do not value academics are judged negatively, revealing deficit assumptions around differences that scholars have cautioned against (Castro, 2010; Lawson, 2013; Swartz, 2009). Rather than affirming students’ non-academic strengths (e.g., their interests), teachers predominantly look for academic gaps. The gaps teachers seek, again, reflect the prepotence of prevailing ideologies around meritocracy. In particular, the gaps expose assumptions of the uni-dimensional definition of a child’s worth as academic merit and the sanctity of education in Singapore. These insights reveal the need to, as Lawson (2013) argues, trouble how diversity is understood through ‘epistemological, relational, political, and ethical’ (p. 118) stances. Through understanding diversity relationally, we are invited to rethink the place and limits of dominant narratives and ideologies and, hopefully, imagine alternatives.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study shows how ten teachers’ understandings of diversity and by extension, equity, are constructed in Singapore—student differences acquire values through the influence of ideologies, national narratives, economics, education, and society. For scholars and educators in Singapore, these teachers’ limited recognition of diversity as just academic readiness requires further scrutiny over the consequences



of an uncritical subscription to meritocratic principles in Singapore. While these teachers' commitment to raising the academic achievement of all children, regardless of other differences, arguably reveals critical elements of good sense, it begets the question of what happens when academic merit is over-emphasized. It also raises the need to explore how teachers can be encouraged to recognize students' non-academic strengths and incorporate these creatively into their curriculum and instruction. To be fair, given the small sample size and examinable-subject context, these teachers' experiences may not reflect the larger teaching cohort or teachers' engagements during non-examinable subject contexts; this thus warrants further studies involving a larger and more representative randomised sample across different schooling contexts. For regional and international scholars, it is worth recalling that, as pointed out earlier, the overwhelming majority of studies on diversity has been located in Anglo-Saxon countries. The logic and consequence of this geographic focus has been a methodological particularism in our understandings of diversity—ironically, however, in less than diverse ways. We suggest that because 'diversity is situated,' further studies that seek to locate its discourse and practice in societies founded upon different modes of social organization, historical foundations and inter-cultural relations are crucial for achieving a more inclusive and expansive understanding of the notion and its related phenomena. Indeed, given that diversity is bound to a larger 'hegemonic discourse' (Swartz, 2009, p. 1045) characterized by norming and inbuilt bias, we propose that a useful heuristic to ask when interacting with the term is: Diversity vis-à-vis who and what narratives?

## References

- Albright, J., & Kramer-Dahl, A. (2009). The legacy of instrumentality in policy and pedagogy in the teaching of English: The case of Singapore. *Research papers in education*, 24(2), 201-222.
- Alviar-Martin, T., & Ho, L.-C. (2011). "So, where do they fit in?" Teachers' perspectives of multicultural education and diversity in Singapore. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(1), 127-135.
- Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of educational research*, 86(1), 163-206.
- Ball, S. J., (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228.
- Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (2010). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Barr, M. D. (2006). The charade of meritocracy. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 169(8), 18-22.
- Bennett, C. (2001). Genres of research in multicultural education. *Review of educational research*, 71(2), 171-217.
- Berthelsen, D., & Karuppiah, N. (2011). Multicultural education: The understandings of preschool teachers in Singapore. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(4), 38-42.
- Bhowmik, M. K., Kennedy, K. J., & Hue, M. T., (2018) Education for all – but not Hong Kong's ethnic minority students, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(5), 661-679, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2017.1294573
- Castro, A. J. (2010). Themes in the research on preservice teachers' views of cultural diversity: Implications for researching millennial preservice teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 39(3), 198-210.
- Chang, B., & McLaren, P. (2018). Emerging issues of teaching and social justice in Greater China: Neoliberalism and critical pedagogy in Hong Kong. *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(6), 781-803.
- Chang, I. (2017). Multicultural education in Korea. In W. T. Pink, & G. W. Noblit (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* (pp. 173 – 193). Springer: Switzerland.
- Chua, B. H. (2003). Multiculturalism in Singapore: An instrument of social control. *Race & Class*, 44(3), 58-77.
- Chua, M. H. (2018, June 3). Class divide: Singapore in danger of becoming academic aristocracy. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/class-divide-singapore-in-danger-of-becoming-academic-aristocracy>.
- Department of Statistics, (2019). *Singapore Population and Population Structure Statistics*. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/>

- Doerr, N. M., (2020). Introduction: Borders, Japan, and global education. In N. M. Doerr, *The global education effect and Japan: Constructing new borders and identification practices* (pp. 3-32). Routledge: London.
- Dunne, M. & Gazeley, L. (2008) Teachers, social class and underachievement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(5), 451-463.
- Fraser, N. (2003). Rethinking recognition: overcoming displacement and reification in cultural politics. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Recognition struggles and social movements: Contested identities, agency and power*, 21-32. Cambridge University Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>
- Ghosh, R. (2018). Multiculturalism in a Comparative Perspective: Australia, Canada and India. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 50(1), 15-36.
- Gollnick, D. M., & Chinn, P. C. (2013). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*. Pearson Higher Ed.
- Gopinathan, S., & Mardiana, A. B. (2013). Globalization, the state and curriculum reform. In *Globalization and the Singapore curriculum* (pp. 15-32). Springer.
- Hatch, A. J. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. State University of New York Press.
- Heng, M. A., & Fernandez, L. (2016). Re-examining differentiation: Big ideas and misguided notions Curriculum Leadership by Middle Leaders (pp. 116-136): Routledge.
- Heng, T.T. & Song, L. A (2020). proposed framework for understanding educational change and transfer: Insights from Singapore teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction. *Journal of Educational Change* 21, 595–622 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09377-0>
- Heng, T.T., & Song, L. (In press). At the intersection of educational change and borrowing: teachers implementing learner-centred education in Singapore. *COMPARE: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*.
- Heng, T. T., Song, L., & Tan, K. H. K. (2021). Understanding the interaction of assessment, learning and context: Insights from Singapore. *Educational Research*, 63(1), 65-79, DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2021.1874248.
- HistorySG. (2014). *Launch of National Education: 17 May 1997*. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/44fa0306-ddfe-41bc-8bde-8778ff198640>
- Ho, L.-C. (2009). Global multicultural citizenship education: A Singapore experience. *The Social Studies*, 100(6), 285-293.

- Ho, L. C. (2020). 'Our students do not get that equal chance': teachers' perspectives of meritocracy. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2020.1796927
- Hogan, D., Chan, M., Rahim, R., Kwek, D., Maung Aye, K., Loo, S. C., Sheng, Y. Z., & Luo, W. (2013). Assessment and the logic of instructional practice in Secondary 3 English and mathematics classrooms in Singapore. *Review of Education*, 1(1), 57-106.
- Hollinsworth, D. (2016). Unsettling Australian settler supremacy: combating resistance in university Aboriginal studies. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(2), 412-432.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.911166>
- Jackson, L. (2018). Who Is Hong Kong? Diversity in Postcolonial Hong Kong Curriculum. In Y. K. Cha, S. H. Ham, & M. Lee (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Multicultural Education Research in Asia Pacific* (pp. 91-103). London: Routledge.
- Jiang, H. (2016). Revisiting individualism and collectivism: a multinational examination of pre-service teachers' perceptions on student academic performances. *Intercultural Education*, 27(1), 101-110.
- Jo, J. Y. & Jung, M. (2017). Rethinking diversity in South Korea: Examining the ideological underpinnings of multicultural education policies and programs. In W. T. Pink, & G. W. Noblit (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* (pp. 195-212). Springer: Switzerland.
- Kallen, H. M. (1924). *Culture and democracy in the United States*. Boni and Liveright.
- Koh, A. (2014). Doing class analysis in Singapore's elite education: Unravelling the smokescreen of 'meritocratic talk'. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 12(2), 196-210.
- Kwek, D., Miller, R., & Manzon, M. (2019). 'Bridges and Ladders': The Paradox of Equity in Excellence in Singapore Schools. In *Equity in Excellence* (pp. 87-108). Springer.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). It's not the culture of poverty, it's the poverty of culture: The problem with teacher education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 104-109.
- Ladson-Billings, G. J. (1999). Chapter 7: Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of research in education*, 24(1), 211-247.
- Lawson, H., Boyask, R. & Waite, S. (2013). Construction of difference and diversity within policy and practice in England. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(1), 107-122.
- Lian, K. F. (2016). Multiculturalism in Singapore: Concept and practice. In *Multiculturalism, migration, and the politics of identity in Singapore* (pp. 11-29). Springer.
- Lim, L. (2013). Meritocracy, egalitarianism and elitism: A preliminary and provisional assessment of Singapore's primary education review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education*, 33(1), 1—14.

- Lim, L., & Apple, M. W. (2015). Elite rationalities and curricular form: 'Meritorious' class reproduction in the elite thinking curriculum in Singapore. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45(5): 472–490.
- Lim, L., & Apple, M. W. (2016). *The strong state and curriculum reform: Assessing the politics and possibilities of educational change in Asia*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lim, L., & Tan, M. (2018). Meritocracy, policy and pedagogy: culture and the politics of recognition and redistribution in Singapore. *Critical studies in education*, 1-17.
- Lim, L., Tan, M., & Saito, E. (2019). Culturally relevant pedagogy: Developing principles of description and analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, 77(1), 43-52.
- Lingard, B., & Mills, M. (2007). Pedagogies making a difference: Issues of social justice and inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 11(3), 233-244.
- Loh, P. Y. (2014). *Racial Harmony Day*. [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_965\\_2004-12-31.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_965_2004-12-31.html)
- Mathews, M. (2015). The state and implication of our differences: Insights from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language. In *Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences* (pp. 107-141). World Scientific.
- Mills, C. (2008). Making a difference: moving beyond the superficial treatment of diversity [Article]. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(4), 261-275.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660802375925>
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2020). *SkillsFuture for Educators*.  
<https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/cos2020/skillfuture-for-educators.html>
- Plano Clark, V. L., & Ivankova, N. V., (2017). *Mixed methods research: A guide to the field*. Vol. 3: Sage publications: California.
- Santamaria, L. J. (2009). Culturally responsive differentiated instruction: Narrowing gaps between best pedagogical practices benefiting all learners. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 214-247.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for information*, 22(2), 63-75.
- Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2009). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*. Wiley New York.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE.
- Swartz, E. (2009). Diversity: Gatekeeping knowledge and maintaining inequalities. *Review of educational research*, 79(2), 1044-1083.

- Tan, K. P. (2008). Meritocracy and elitism in a global city: Ideological shifts in Singapore. *International Political Science Review*, 29(1), 7-27.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). How to Differentiate in Mixed-Ability classrooms. 2nd. *Alexandria, VA: ASCD*.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Ascd.
- Tsuneyoshi, R. (2018). Understanding multicultural Japan: Four frameworks. In Y. K. Cha, S. H. Ham, & M. Lee (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Multicultural Education Research in Asia Pacific* (pp. 188-200). London: Routledge.
- Yiu, L. (2019, April 6). *Developing a Harmony-based Approach to Student Diversity: Multiculturalism in Taiwan's schools*. American Educational Research Association Toronto, Canada.
- Yuan, M., Sude, Wang, T., Zhang, W., Chen, N., Simpson, A., & Dervin F. (2020) Chinese minzu education in higher education: An inspiration for 'western' diversity education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(4), 461-486.

Acknowledgements: Deep gratitude goes out to reviewers for their time and effort in strengthening this article, as well as Lynn Song for her research support.

Funding: This work was supported by the MOE Education Research Funding Programme under OER02/17HTT.

NTUIRB: 2017-10-050

Postprint

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Backgrounds

<b>Participant*</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Gender</b>
1	Secondary	English	7	M
2	Secondary	English	21	F
3	Secondary	Maths	7	M
4	Secondary	Science	23	F
5	Secondary	Maths	7	F
6	Primary	Maths	3	F
7	Primary	Science	16	M
8	Primary	Maths	20	F
9	Primary	English	20	F
10	Primary	English	10	F

\* Participants' pseudonyms have been omitted here to avoid identification.