

Navigating Diversities and Differences in Singapore Schools An Exploratory Study of Singapore's Students' Intercultural Mindedness

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- The teaching and learning around diversity issues need to be facilitated more explicitly to nurture intercultural literacy in students.
- There is a need for a greater emphasis on intersectional identities reflecting the lived realities of students in the intercultural curriculum of secondary schools.
- A deep culture approach to students' intercultural learning is required to correct bias, challenge assumptions and question stereotypes in order to strengthen social cohesion.
- More open conversations over diversity issues engaging students' lived experiences with students as co-constructors of intercultural learning could better nurture intercultural mindedness.
- A repertoire of a language of difference and inclusion needs to be established to help teachers guide students to dialogue and reflect on intercultural issues.

BACKGROUND

Singapore's population has increasingly diversified with migration and intermarriages, and there have been more reports of racism as well as tension between locals and migrants recently. With greater public interest to discuss race and other diversity matters, understanding of multiculturalism needs to go beyond discussions on official multiculturalism in

Singapore, but focus on how lived experiences of diversities are navigated among the young.

FOCUS OF STUDY

The study investigated the lived experiences of everyday multiculturalism of secondary school students and how they navigate differences in and beyond school. The findings on students' interpretations of diversities, intercultural understanding, as well as the challenges to their navigation of differences help us identify existing gaps in and ways to improve intercultural teaching and learning.

KEY FINDINGS

- Students tended to racialize identities, conflating race with other qualifiers of diversities such as religion and nationality, recognizing a limited range of intersectional identities than their lived experiences afforded.
- Distinctly more stereotyping, name-calling, exclusion and other unpleasant encounters reported were related to ethnic minorities.
- Different majority-minority asymmetries shape students' experiences. Linguistic and ethnic asymmetries do not always align.
- Students exhibited a variegated understanding of "racism" and "stereotype", sharing contradictory responses in navigating unpleasant encounters. Some also struggled with articulating these concepts.

- Students expressed ambivalence in handling intercultural difference/tension.
- Students reported little discussions in class on race and religion-related issues and expressed the desire for more such dialogues.
- Students reported more experiences of intercultural tensions and/or exclusion at primary school level. There were also some similar reports of such experiences at preschool level.
- Joking formed a large part of racist encounters, with students unsure how to respond to such situations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

- Findings from the study help inform the design of conversations and intercultural learning around race and racism.
- This study makes a modest contribution towards the theorising of Singapore youths' experiences of everyday multiculturalism which is embedded in intersectionalities of ethnicity, language, gender, structure of schooling, nationality and etc.
- Further research should be conducted with considerations given to local forms of diversities and intersectionalities as well as how local majority-minority asymmetries in Singapore contribute to students' lived experiences.
- With student demographics diversifying, lived experiences are more varied than any planned

curriculum could reflect. A dialogic approach to intercultural learning roping in students as co-constructors thus becomes vital.

- Further research could be conducted on teachers' capacity, beliefs and intercultural mindedness to facilitate training and support a move away from a risk-averse mindset towards discussions of diversity.
- Review intercultural curriculum at primary school and even preschool level to better nurture intercultural mindedness at a younger age.
- Case studies and scenarios generated from the study could inform in-service course and professional development workshops for teachers on facilitating diversity education.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 86 secondary school students across 3 schools participated in the study. Representations of ethnicity, gender, nationality, socio-economic backgrounds and streams were taken into account in the sampling.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative exploratory study employed a variety of data collection methods including focus group discussions, individual interviews, lesson observations and observations of school events.

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