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**Multicultural Texts in Contexts: Comparing the Use of Multicultural Texts in the Literature Classroom in the United States and Singapore**

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**Abstract**

The need to bring culturally relevant material into English Literature classrooms has long been considered important from academic and intellectual as well as societal and personal perspectives. More recently, scholarship and educational policies are encouraging the use of “multicultural” texts that reflect the polyphony of voices in the world as being culturally relevant, and having the potential to engage students in fertile discussion about their identity and the world around them.

This paper takes a close look at scholarship, research, policy and practice in the U.S. and Singapore in the last 20 years, and gives insights into how practice is being contextualized in both countries. While certain terminology seem to be the same, close examination of the data show that there are notable differences in scholarship, policy, and practice in both countries. Particularly important to this discussion is the notion of what counts as “multicultural” and how that has impacted upon curriculum choice and instruction.

### **Multicultural Texts in Contexts: Comparing the Use of Multicultural Texts in the Literature Classroom in the United States and Singapore**

If you were to look at a map of the world, you would easily find the United States. With a total land area of about 10,000 square kilometers, about half the size of Russia and slightly larger than China, the U.S. takes up a substantial portion of the world map. In contrast, you would have to squint in order to find Singapore at the tip of the Malaysian Peninsular, a mere 693 square kilometres, smaller even than New York City (CIA, 2003). The population of Singapore stands at about 4.5 million (CIA, 2007a) in contrast to the United States population of 3 billion (CIA, 2007b). While the United States does not have an official language, English is the *de facto* native language of most citizens. Singapore has four official languages – English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil – with English as the official language of instruction and business. The national language policy requires all students to learn a second language in what is deemed their “mother tongue” language. Both countries have high literacy rates above 92% (UNDP, 2007/2008).

While the United States does not have an explicit policy on multiculturalism, the diversity of its population has necessitated discussions about multicultural education. Definitions of what multiculturalism means has shifted from the melting pot metaphor of liberal assimilation to the metaphor of America as a mosaic of diversity where differences reside alongside unity (Dobel, Feb 28, 1997). A wealth of research and scholarship abound in multicultural education in the United States (e.g. Banks & Banks, 2001; Gay, 2000; Mahalingam & McCarthy, 2000; Nieto, 2004). Singapore, on the other hand, has adopted an explicit policy of multiculturalism with focus on racial unity among its citizens but lacks the vociferous debate that is present in America.

At the international level, the call for an acceptance of multiculturalism as a way of life underlies the fight against racism (UN Sixtieth General Assembly, 2005). Lynch (1989) suggests that there are three aims for multicultural education: creative

development of cultural diversity, maintenance of social cohesion, and achievement of human justice. These aims towards a humanistic embracing of those who are different is but one aim of multicultural education, and even then, can take different forms in different countries and education systems. For the purposes of this paper, multiculturalism refers broadly to the recognition of diverse cultures both within and beyond the borders of the nation, and includes race and ethnicity, gender and disabilities, among other marked categories. The culture and history of each country will have an impact on the differing trajectories of the development of multiculturalism and education in different contexts. To further complicate matters, there are diverse ways of viewing multiculturalism at the level of theory and practice even within the boundaries of the nation.

In English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms or literature classrooms, multicultural education is worked out in the context of text choice and instructional practices. The study of literary texts in literature can be seen as potential discursive spaces for conversations about multiculturalism. In terms of literature education, the tension between the use of canonical and multicultural literature on the official curriculum (See Applebee, 1996; Hirsch, 1987 for the debate in the U.S. context ) arises in part from the belief that the narratives in literary texts are discursive spaces for dialogic conversations (Langer, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1995; Sumara, 1996) about what is culturally relevant (Applebee, 1996). In terms of canon construction, the placement of particular texts on the official curriculum is a way of representing what is important in particular societies (Apple, 1992; Corse, 1997; Guillory, 1993; Said, 2000). These literary narratives provide spaces for transmission of particular ideas as well negotiation of ideas and identity practices (McGinley et al., 1997; Radway, 1991; Said, 2000; Sutherland, 2005). Placing particular literary texts on the curriculum can be seen in part as representation of particular voices, but more importantly, the way these narratives are read can be seen as the validation of particular ways of reading and valuing what is considered literature worth learning. Thus, the choice of what

gets placed on the official curriculum together with particular reading practices is an indication of what counts as culturally relevant in schooling.

Given that schooling is meant to prepare youths for engaging in current conversations, both of today and tomorrow, it is important that the conversations placed on the curriculum and the way students engage in such conversations are culturally significant and relevant (Applebee, 1996; Kelly, Luke, & Green, 2008). This paper examines the policy and practice of the implementation of the use of multicultural literature in the U.S. and Singapore context to ask how multicultural literary texts are perceived and placed in these educational contexts. An overview of the cultural-historical development of multicultural education in each country forms the backdrop against which specific ELA or literature practices have taken place. A comparative study of the two countries may yield insights into how the multicultural literature is contextualized in both curriculum and instruction in both countries. Finally, given recent questions about what counts as knowledge in this globalized postmodernity (Kelly et al., 2008; Sperling & DiPardo, 2008), it is important to ask how the use of multicultural literature can be reconceptualized to bring culturally relevant conversations into the 21<sup>st</sup> century literature classroom. Specifically, this paper asks, what does policy, scholarship and empirical research reveal about the use of multicultural literature in the schooling and classroom contexts of the United States and Singapore?

### **Multicultural Texts in Context: U.S.A.**

#### **Context: The Development of Multicultural Education in U.S.A.**

James Banks has been one of the most outspoken and prolific scholars of multicultural education in the United States. He points to the fact that America is a nation of immigrants and that there are various critical junctures where there were debates over issues of immigration and citizenship. For him, the key struggle is between nativist/ assimilationist conceptions and what he terms transformative paradigms of citizenship. Nativist and assimilationist views demanded full

assimilation into dominant American culture in terms of language and culture to gain citizenship rights whereas transformative paradigms argued for immigrants' rights to cultural diversity in America, that is, they should be allowed the right to keep and practice their ethnic and cultural practices (Banks, 2004, 2008). Multicultural education in this view encourages the recognition and celebration of diversity, and uses difference as a point of entry for defining and organizing learning.

It is important to understand in the U.S. context the complexity of diversity, with its history of multiple immigration waves and responses at different points in history to different groups of people (M. M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory provides a useful guide for getting at the dynamics of minority settlement in America. He explains that in settler societies such as the United States with a White dominant group, minority groups can be divided into those that have come to settle in the country for the same reason as the dominant group and those that who have been made part of the society against their will. The cultural-historical background of each group as voluntary or non-voluntary minority groups affects their cultural frames of references with regard to schooling (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Thus, multicultural education is not a one size fits all solution and there are different ways of approaching multicultural education (e.g. Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Given the enormity of and diversity within the United States, it is not surprising that Banks' earlier work viewed multiculturalism and reflective nationalism as a precursor to globalism and global competency. Banks writes:

*If students develop the ability to view events and situations from the perspectives of ethnic groups in their nation-state, they will be better able to view events within other nations from the perspectives of major participants of these events. Students who are able to relate positively to and function within a variety of cultures within their own nation are also more likely to function successfully in foreign cultures than other individuals who view domestic ethnic culture as exotic and strange. We can help reduce nonreflective*

*nationalism and ethnocentrism in students by helping them become more ethnically literate and competent citizens in their nation state.* (Banks, 1981)

More recently, however, scholarship on multiculturalism is increasingly including discussions of globalization and tying the necessity of multicultural education to citizenship education (Banks, 2008; Matus & McCarthy, 2003; McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2003; C. Suárez-Orozco, 2004). For example, in Banks' (2008) most recent article, he conceptualizes a transformative citizenship education that includes visions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Additionally, there is a need to complicate the "knowledge politics" of multiculturalism rather than romanticizing minority groups in a historical vacuum (Mahalingam & McCarthy, 2000).

### **Texts in Context: The Use of Multicultural Literature in U.S. classrooms**

The debate over what gets placed on the curriculum is a question of what counts as culturally relevant knowledge, whether it is a fixed canon determined by specialists (Hirsch, 1987) or a curriculum that includes relevant conversations of its times, which includes multicultural conversations (Applebee, 1996). From another perspective, the issue of what counts as official knowledge has in part its roots the question of what it means to be American, whether in the form of a monological culture (e.g. Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1987) or a postcolonial embracing of cultural difference and hybridity (e.g. McCarthy et al., 2003). U.S. policy allows the freedom for individual states to direct learning standards and curriculum in accordance with the principles of the national curriculum, which may include emphasis on broad readings and the development of critical dispositions (e.g. New York State Learning Standards, 1996) or on general literary skills and understanding of historical contexts (California Content Standards, 1997). Teacher education has an important role to play in the preparation of pre-service teachers ability and their willingness to use multicultural texts in the ELA classroom (Chevalier & Houser, 1997; Dong, 2005; Margerison, 1995).

Scholarship and research in the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom have tended to focus on diversity within the U.S., oftentimes referring to voices that have been typically omitted from the traditional canon or marginalized groups in the United States (e.g. Cai, 1998; Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 1999; Landt, 2006). Given Banks' early formulation of the stages of multicultural (or multiethnic) education, it is not surprising that much earlier research on multicultural literature have tended to cluster at the stage of multiculturalism and reflective nationalism. While most research has focussed on race and ethnicity (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Godina, 1996; McGinley et al., 1997; Sutherland, 2005), there has also been some research in the areas of gender (Athanases, 1998; Sutherland, 2005; Thein, 2005) and social class (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007). While necessary, this emphasis on diversity within the country may lead to a different sort of ethnocentricity which neglects the view of the world (Jordan & Purves, 1993; Purves, 1991). In a linear development of worldly understanding, one must understand the world within before moving to the world beyond. Yet, in this globalized world of "time-space compression" (Harvey, 2001), the definition of one's community has changed to include places that are necessarily physically far from oneself, and it may be necessary to move recursively and fluidly from self to nation, self to world and back again in the way we see the world through literary texts.

The shift from the use of canonical to multicultural literature has been slow. Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber (2006) report in their survey of 72 schools in Alabama that there had been little change since Applebee's (1993) national study in more than ten years earlier and that teachers were still using literary texts that had been staples on the official school curriculum such as *Macbeth* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, they report that teachers with 1 – 5 years experience were more likely to use multicultural literature, a sign that particular focus on the use of multicultural literature in preservice learning was having an effect on teachers entering the field.

What this illustrates is that while change is possible and slow, the effect of teacher training does have some impact on curriculum choices and instructional methods.

Research in the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom can be categorized into two different strands of culturally responsive literature and cross-cultural literature. The first body of research centered around the metaphor of multicultural lens as mirror is built on the notion of culturally responsive education (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2004). Bringing literature that represents the voices of the marginalized is seen as a way for the students to relate to these texts and begin to engage in conversations about literature and life (Brooks, 2006; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Godina, 1996; Henry, 1998; Paley, 1994). However, there are dangers of essentializing representations of a particular group (Brooks, 2006; Dudley-Marling, 2003; Harada, 1994), assuming racial and/or ethnic issues as foremost on students' minds (Altieri, 1985) and neglecting other students in the classroom (Glazier & Seo, 2005).

The second theme in the use of multicultural literature looks beyond the mirror to focus on cross-cultural interactions, seeing multicultural literature as culturally relevant literature for students to engage in conversations about self and other (Athanases, 1993, 1998; Spears-Bunton, 1990). This particular theme is often accompanied by a focus on critical readings and the literary text as well as the class discussions are envisioned as discursive space for engagement in "dangerous discourses" (Bigler & Collins, 1995). The importance of teaching particular ways of reading is underscored by Dressel's (2005) research involving the examination of the written work of 123 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. She found that mere exposure to multicultural literary texts was insufficient to cultivate a understanding of self and others in the world. A change in the way of reading is required to help students to think critically, to take on multiple perspectives, and to engage in dialogue about self and others, and engage in change thinking and action (Athanases, 1998; Beach et al., 2008; Boyd, 2002; McGinley et al., 1997; Vinz, 2000).

The centrality of identity and culture is emerging in recent research (Beach et al., 2008; McGinley et al., 1997; Sutherland, 2005; Thein, 2005), as researchers grapple with the issue of how identity is negotiated in the process of reading narratives in the context of the literature classroom. For example, Sutherland (2005) studied how adolescent African-American girls negotiated their understandings of themselves as African-American females as they read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade class and illustrated how the literary text can serve as a discursive space for culturally relevant discussions. Recent conversations about a culturally relevant curriculum suggest that school practices mediate the identity negotiation practices of students, and that issues of power, text, and identity need to be further explored (Matus & McCarthy, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2003).

#### **A Summary: U.S. Context and Texts**

Policy directions are broad and varied in the United States and much of the research on the use of multicultural literature in ELA classrooms has tended to focus on curriculum and instructional methods, with a tendency towards focussing on diversity within the United States. Current research is moving beyond work in student responses to studies of identity negotiation as students read multicultural texts in the situated contexts of school readings. What U.S. scholarship and research show is the complexity of the term multicultural in how it is actualized in individual classrooms and how curriculum choice and instructional method are instrumental in the enculturation of particular reading dispositions towards the understanding of issues of self and others. Recent research in curriculum from a postcolonial perspective suggests that there is a need to problematize curriculum practices to complicate the issue of identity practices as mediated by the reading practices and selected narrative texts.

## **Multicultural Texts in Context: Singapore**

### **Context: The Development of Multicultural Education in Singapore**

Unlike the U.S., Singapore, a former British trading post, has a much shorter national history with its official independence dated 9 August 1965. Like America, it is a nation of immigrants, mostly from the surrounding regions of China, India and Southeast Asia. However, what is different is that the nation consists of voluntary immigrants who migrated to Singapore in the 1800s and 1900s in search of better economic possibilities, and English is seen very much as a language of economic possibilities rather than subjugation. In fact, the theme of economic progress has very much directed the grand narratives of nation-building, and the politics of pragmatism direct the marketing of Singapore as a global cosmopolitan city – with initiatives such as Singapore 21 and The Renaissance City – in its bid to maintain their economic success (Velayutham, 2007). Remaking Singapore (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's, 21 August 2005, cited in Velayutham, 2007, p. 208) is the grand narrative of national construction and reconstruction.

“Narratives of pragmatic and political utility” (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007, p. 642) see a reductive surface model of multiculturalism within the nation tending towards homogeneity, and an emphasis on national identity vis-à-vis the globalized world and vis-à-vis the West (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). In order to maintain racial harmony, unity between the main Chinese, Malay, Indian races emphasized. This is seen in the celebration of diverse festivals of the different ethnic groups and clear governmental policy to discourage segregation, for example, through public housing policy that encourage a mix of ethnic groups by having quotas in each district. In schools, the dominant ideology is that of meritocracy and the diversity of the different groups are celebrated on a state-mandated Racial Harmony Day. This aim towards a non-combative race and ethnic relations is explicitly stated in the Ministry of Education's (MOE) statement encapsulated the *Desired outcomes of education*, a policy statement with a list of guiding values for educating “the individual and the citizen”

(MOE, 2008). Among MOE's eight desired outcomes for post-secondary and tertiary students are listed the following:

- *be morally upright, be culturally rooted yet understanding and respecting differences, be responsible to family, community and country*
- *believe in our principles of multi-racialism and meritocracy, appreciate the national constraints but see the opportunities*
- *Think global, but be rooted to Singapore*

These outcomes encapsulate the government's desire to construct a sense of national identity which includes both a cosmopolitan outlook, and paradoxically, a national rootedness. National Education, a state-mandated curriculum intervention, captures the anxiety of the nation-state of Singapore as it tries to develop a national culture while encouraging citizens to go global in order to compete in world markets (Koh, 2005). The official view is that the sense of community is local but the view of markets must be global.

### **Texts in Context: The Use of Multicultural Literature in Singapore classrooms**

The role of literature as a school subject in Singapore has been "bedevilled by adherence to a hegemonic principle or pragmatism which has routinely informed public policy an choice" (Poon, 2007, p. 51). The national curriculum, while not compulsory, serves as a strong mediator of what actually happens in the school curriculum. National high-stakes examinations such as the GCE-O and GCE-A Level Examinations direct and constrain curriculum and instructional practices for the majority of schools in Singapore. Pedagogical research is relatively new in the Singapore context with the setting up of the Centre of Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education in 2002. While there has been little research on the use of multicultural literature in the English language and literature classroom, policy directions and scholarly discussion inform the perspectives taken at ground level inform the discussion that follows.

Literature as a subject is taught at lower secondary level, with students having the option to continue taking the subject at upper secondary and junior college level. One of the aims of literature instruction at lower secondary level include that of students being able to “explore areas of human concern, thus leading to a greater understanding of themselves and others” (Curriculum Planning and Development Department, 1999, p. 3), and a guiding principle is that students should be “exposed to as wide a range of texts as possible” (ibid, p. 4), including different genres, human concerns, and literature from Singapore and other parts of the world. These recommendations are in part directed by shifting examination practices and a list of recommended texts for lower secondary school students. Schools have a large measure of freedom to choose their literary texts for study within the broad guidelines, and actualization of curriculum and instruction vary from school to school.

Practices of note include the expansion of the official recommended list to include literary texts from a more Anglophile selection to a wider, though limited, selection of works from different parts of the world. In line with the National Education policy, works by Singaporean and Malaysian authors are also included in the list. Another change is the recently implemented practice in 2006 of including a Singaporean or Malaysian text on the GCE ‘O’ Level Literature examination paper. This shift can also be seen as a movement towards the affirmation of one’s own literature and a view towards a global society where it is world literature rather than Anglophile literature that needs to be considered. However, the tensions between the great classics of the Anglophile center versus one’s own literature continue to exist in the daily practice of curriculum and instructional practices at the level of classroom implementation as teachers trained in particular academic and literary traditions grapple with what to teach at the level of secondary school instruction. Although some top schools have moved towards an International Baccalaureate type program which structures the use of global and local literatures into its curriculum, for most

schools, the issue of National Education is more pertinent than that of global citizenship, at least in the literary curriculum.

The anxiety of a relatively young nation-state to consolidate its identity among a world of ancient civilizations is evident in discussions about the value of Singapore literature (Singh, 1999). The tensions pride of place and a reworking of definitions of what counts as good literature is part of the process of canon construction that takes into account both world literature (often Eurocentric but not always) and local literature. The movements in the literature curriculum and examination towards a conscious emphasis on Singapore and Malaysian works makes visible the politics of curriculum (Apple, 1992). In this case, literary texts are seen to serve as a source of national pride, a space for the official promulgation of the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) of the nation-state’s literary works.

Holden (1999) clearly articulates three key motivations for Literature education in Singapore. Firstly, he suggest that literature teaching has to be based upon humanist principles which focuses on the understanding of self and society, and different communities in society. Secondly, he suggests that literature study provides a space for national culture formation for the study of national identity which includes ethnic and even regional identity. Thirdly, he proposes that literature instruction should promote critical thinking about nationhood, as opposed to “a museum-like representation of national culture, a tableau which is prescribed, prematurely fixed, and impervious to change” (p. 88), a suggestion echoed by Poon (2007). Thus, the study of multicultural literature is seen to bring into its fold local as well as world literatures and to serve as a discursive space for dialogic conversations about self in relation to nation and world.

In Singapore policy and debates, literary texts are seen as powerful indicators and transmitters of identity. Ironically, the current emphasis on critical thinking (Poon, 2007) means that identity should not so much be transmitted but negotiated in the literature classroom through the use of multicultural texts that figure both the local

and global. Poon (2007) suggests learning from critical literacy studies and reframing the study of literature as the enculturation of critical dispositions with a focus on the politics of representation would renew literature's role in educating the next generation. Applying this to the study of local and global texts would mean conscious attention to positioning of readers, writers, and characters even as students read global and local literary texts. These literary texts become a place for examination of self-positioning in relation to community, nation, and world.

Currently, the study of literature in Singapore (as compared to using literary texts for language acquisition purposes) beyond lower secondary level is often viewed as a difficult subject which is reserved for the elite (Poon, 2007), and there is a tendency to view the study of particular texts as the acquisition of linguistic and cultural capital, allowing Singaporeans to hobnob with English-speaking elites of the world. Ultimately, the acquisition of intercultural capital in the form possessing knowledge as well as ways of reading, writing and thinking that would place one at the forefront of a knowledge-based economy is important. With a recent movement towards a more literature-oriented language program and reframing of the use of literature in Singapore, there might be changes towards the use and study of literature at all levels. More studies need to explore how literature can be used in this context to bring culturally relevant knowledge and reading skills into language and literature classrooms.

### **Summary: Singapore Context and Texts**

The issues underlying the use of multicultural literature in Singapore are inherently tied up with issues of the construction of a national identity and perhaps less explicitly, the idea of a global identity. Like the U.S., the issue of what it means to be Singaporean is negotiated in part by what is represented on the literature curriculum. Paradoxically, the cultivation of a national identity is not limited to the boundaries of the nation and the government's aim to rein in cosmopolitanism for economic expansion (Koh, 2005) necessarily involves the discussion of how national

identity relates to a global identity. While the official identity promoted by the official channels of the Ministry of Education and media dominate the regular soundbytes, how it works out in the everyday is different but as yet insufficiently explored.

### **Multicultural Texts in Contexts: U.S.A. and Singapore**

Bokhurst-Heng (2007) points out that studies of multiculturalism have tended to be dominated by Western perspectives and paradigms and argues studies of narratives of multiculturalism based in specific socio-political and historical contexts. This cross-cultural comparison begins with the understanding that the specific socio-political and historical factors of different states with different multicultural narratives impact upon curriculum and instruction in very specific ways. Understanding the cultural-historical development of the different trajectories of the use of multicultural literature in each nation allow deeper insight about the specificities of multicultural literature as it is situated in each country and the different terrains that educators have to negotiate. One caveat is that there are multiple narratives in exploring multiculturalism and its impact in the literature curriculum and instructional practices. What I have attempted to do is to present one dominant version from the perspective of an educator and researcher involved at various times in the practice of literature in both the United States and Singapore.

For the U.S., with history of non-voluntary as well as voluntary immigrants, there are separate issues of redressing balances and creating opportunities for learning. In terms of the use of multicultural literature in the ELA classroom, issues of culturally responsive literature have to be considered alongside teaching for cross-cultural awareness and critical engagement for both national and global citizenship. In the Singapore context, issues of national and global citizenship similarly preoccupy the nation, driven ostensibly by pragmatic concerns of economic survival. Less preoccupied with the redressing of balance, the issue seems to be an engagement with what it means to be Singaporean and how such discussions can be facilitated through literary narratives studied in the literature classroom.

Yet, for both nations, issues of what it means to be a national citizen and global citizen are imminently important for in the preparation of the young in this globalized postmodernity (e.g. Banks, 2008, Koh, 2005). National policy and global movements are inseparable in this day and age and it is no longer sufficient to define one's identity by relation to one's nation. Or to put it another way, one's identity needs to take into context both nation and world. As the youths of today deal with change in changing times, they need to grapple with issues of identity and literary narratives provide one space in the curriculum for such negotiations. However, whether such conversations about self and world are brought into the classroom for discussion depends on situated versions of the types of texts that are culturally relevant to today's youths. In my recent research with American high school students reading *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), a culturally distant memoir set in China during the Cultural Revolution, it was clear that students were encouraged to engage in conversations about themselves as Americans when reading literary texts situated in another nation and culture. Yet, most students do not read critically or for culture unless they are taught to (Jordan & Purves, 1993), and readings often tended towards universalizing differences and creating problematic binaries (eg. U.S.A. versus China, traditional versus modern, they versus us) when students read a culturally distant literary text without sufficient cultural-historical understanding and emphasis on critical readings.

What is also clear from this brief overview of the two countries is how textual narratives are still seen as important spaces for the negotiation of identity. At policy level or at the level of scholarship, the literary text is seen as a place for engagement in issues of identity. Official curriculum concerns itself with what gets placed on the curriculum because that sends a message as to what counts. Canon construction will continue to be an ongoing issue (Apple, 1992; Corse, 1997; Guillory, 1993) – what changes is what counts as culturally relevant in terms of what is read and how it is

read. It is precisely because of the symbolic value of what gets placed on the curriculum that issues of curriculum choice are of continuous relevance for schooling.

The move towards an exploration of identity practices in the United States seem to be in part the recognition of the importance the issue of identity for the modern self (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1996; Taylor, 1989). Habermas & Bluck's (2000) review of literature on life stories suggest that adolescents begin to cognitively develop the need for and the ability to form life stories. Because of the uncertainties of modern life and the existence of multiple alternatives for most people now (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989), it has been suggested that identity making as a reflexive process is necessary for modern individuals. Thus, education needs to prepare the young to learn to manage the myriad of possibilities opened to them and to create their own coherent life story that include particular frameworks (Taylor, 1989), which most advocates of multiculturalism, postcolonialism and globalism will suggest includes the ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives and understand self in relation to others in the world. Literary narratives serve as a potential discursive space for such imagination of self in relation to community (which includes both nation and world).

From this perspective, it seems that there is a need to move from the transmission to critical transformative view of literature learning as critical literacy scholars will tell us (e.g. Freire, 1970; Janks, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Narratives serve as repositories of ideas and discursive space where individuals and groups can "expand the horizons against which the question of what and how to read and write are both posed and answered" (Said, 1993, p. 385). The selection of literary texts than becomes an issue of what kinds of culturally relevant conversations (Applebee, 1996) are being brought into the classroom. These culturally relevant conversations may and will often include the classics. To treat a canonized work as antithesis to multicultural literature is to put up a false binary, and it has to be recognized that there will be a list of works that are deemed valuable. What is

important in this selection process is the explicit questioning of why particular conversations are important and how they should be introduced to the literature classroom. This also requires a change in our perception of reading in the literature classroom. It requires the acknowledgement of multiple perspective, awareness of time, space and place, and understanding of positionings of reader, text, and context that lead to particular readings.

One of my arguments has been that global as well as national conversations need to be considered in the literature classroom. This has to be taken into account with instructional methods and considerations of how particular kinds of students will respond to particular kinds of literary texts. One challenge for the literature teacher is to find a balance between choosing culturally responsive texts and culturally distant texts towards the aim of having culturally relevant conversations that bridge students from their world to that of others. The other challenge is for the teacher to re-vision his or her view of literature instruction to bring critical elements into the ELA and literature classroom.

### **Conclusion: Texts in Contexts**

This comparative study has highlighted what can be learned from different communities with regard to the use of multicultural literature in the literature classroom. However, there needs to be clearer explication of the goals of using multicultural literature in a globalized postmodernity as it is situated or localized in particular contexts. More research needs to examine literature as discursive sites of identity negotiation, and further detail the identity and reading practices of students reading different literary texts. Thinking about the literary text as a place for dialogic engagement of worldviews help educators to decide what kinds of literary texts are culturally relevant for particular kinds of conversations. Given the modern preoccupation with self-identity as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991) and the necessity of a flexible sense of self to get along with strangers in this modern world, research in how we can help students negotiate these spaces and posit self in

relation to nation and world will be able to inform educational practices in literature education.

### Note

\* For a recent comparative study of multicultural education in Singapore and Canada, refer to: Bokhorst-Heng, Wendy D (2007) Multiculturalism's narratives in Singapore and Canada: Exploring a model for comparative multiculturalism and multicultural education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 39(6), 629-658.

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