# Multicultural education:
## The understandings of preschool teachers in Singapore

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**FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION** To be effective, it must be introduced in the early years and reinforced throughout the school years. It is important for teachers of young children to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills and positive attitudes to promote multiculturalism in their classrooms. This paper reports on a survey involving preschool teachers in Singapore who were participating in an in-service training course. The teachers completed a questionnaire to indicate their understandings of multicultural education and their perceptions of its importance in early childhood education. The findings indicated that the teachers endorsed the need for multicultural education in preschools and the importance of children learning tolerance and understanding of other cultures in the Singaporean context. However, while preschool teachers held positive attitudes towards multicultural education, there was limited understanding of the challenges in implementing an anti-bias teaching and curriculum approach. The implications of these findings for preschool teacher education programs in Singapore and in other countries focus on supporting teachers in developing more critical and deeper understandings of multiculturalism.

## Introduction

Multicultural education and global education share important goals. Global education can enable students to gain cross-cultural competency and understandings of global culture (Diaz, 2001). Banks (2001) proposed that citizens who have an understanding of and empathy for the cultures within their own society are also more likely to function effectively within other cultures outside their national borders than are those who do not have this knowledge. Hence, an important goal for multicultural education is that students gain the appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable them to participate successfully in a pluralistic and democratic society. Students need to be able to communicate with people from different cultures in order to build citizenship and morality for the common good of the society they live in (Banks & Banks, 2003).

The tenets of multiculturalism can be incorporated into early childhood education. The early years are a time when young children are internalising knowledge about the moral values and ethical standards of their society (Robles de Melendez & Ostertag, 1997). There has been little investigation of multicultural education in the Singaporean context. Research is needed to understand how Singaporean teachers in early education settings understand concepts of multicultural education so that

they have a level of awareness sufficient to support children in their learning of multicultural values. The present research explores the beliefs of preschool teachers in Singapore about multiculturalism and draws implications about how multiculturalism can be implemented in early childhood programs.

For multicultural education to be effective, it must be taught in the early years of education and reinforced in the later stages (Robles de Melendez & Ostertag, 1997). In the early years, the child's family plays the leading role in socialising the child to the manners, views, beliefs and ideas held within their culture (Garbarino, 1992). With the rise in the number of working parents and children participating in group programs from an early age, preschools have also become an influential socialisation force. Since children's attitudes toward their own and other cultural groups begin to form in the early years, early childhood teachers can influence the development of positive attitudes towards others, as well as incorporating a curriculum focus on tolerance and cross-cultural understandings of others. Early childhood teachers cannot adopt, however, a 'tourist approach' to multiculturalism which stereotypes other cultures and turns the multicultural curriculum into a 'tourist curriculum' (Derman-Sparks & Force, 1989, p. 57). 'Tourist curriculum' which teaches about cultures through celebrations and artefacts of culture, such as

food and traditional clothing, is both patronising and trivialising and does not provide a real understanding of other cultures (Derman-Sparks & Force, 1989). Teachers need to understand their own beliefs about culture and diversity in order to implement multicultural education programs effectively with young children.

## Multiculturalism and the Singaporean context

Singapore is a small island nation with a population of about 5.2 million citizens living closely on an area of about 640 square kilometres. Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. It is a relatively new independent democratic country, a society of immigrants. The population comprises mainly Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (CMIO). Others are mainly Eurasians and Europeans. The relative ratio of the racial groups is 77: 14: 8: 1 respectively. While the four official languages used in Singapore are English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, there are also other dialects spoken, such as Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese by the Chinese citizens and Gujarati and Punjabi by the Indian citizens (Tan, Parsons, Hinson,& Sardo-Brown, 2003). Religions practised in Singapore include Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism (Tan et al., 2003). Therefore, the CMIO model as a racial representation is an oversimplification of the diversity of the population even by language and religion because it implies that each of the four major groups is homogeneous, which is not accurate.

Multicultural education is not a mainstream issue in Singapore. While the government has been able to maintain peace and harmony through its political, social and economic policies and special days, it does not deal with the issue in depth. As Singaporeans are now generally more aware of issues and events around the world through globalisation and the internet, it has become increasingly important for Singapore to consider multicultural education in schools. Teachers and students can discuss global issues and events in classrooms and use them to support multicultural understandings and tolerance within Singaporean society. At the same time as encouraging diversity through preservation of the cultural identity of the racial and ethnic groups in the country, the government has also tried to work towards building social cohesion among different groups, which gave rise to the slogan 'unity in diversity' (Quah, 2000).

While government policies have succeeded in maintaining racial peace and harmony in the past, there is increased ethnic and religious consciousness and tension among Singaporeans in recent years (Quah, 2000). For example, recent cases such as the wearing of the 'tudung' or Muslim head-dress in government schools, and the arrest of the members of the Muslim religious organisation, 'Jemaah Islamiah', for terrorism-related activities, caused a stir among the different ethnic communities in Singapore and revived ethnic tensions. These cases indicate that government policies need to be reconsidered carefully in order to preserve cultural harmony and maintain respect for cultural diversity.

## Multiculturalism in teacher education

Two distinct approaches for incorporating multicultural education with teacher education programs are infusion versus segregation, and culture-specific versus culture-general (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). While the infusion approach integrates understanding for diversity throughout the teacher education program, the segregated approach treats diversity as the focus of a single course or as a topic in a few courses. While a culture-specific approach seeks to prepare teachers to tutor specific cultural groups in particular contexts, a culture-general approach seeks to prepare teachers to be successful in any context that involves cross-cultural interactions. Ladson-Billings (2001), on the other hand, suggested a critical framework for analysing teacher preparation programs. She argued that, regardless of prospective teachers' race, ethnicity, or life experiences, the curriculum should include a focus on understanding the nature of student–teacher relationships and the cultural bases of the curriculum, schooling and society. The education of teachers should encourage active self-reflection on values and beliefs about cultural difference and promote the learning of strategies which allow for student involvement that is active, meaningful and ethno-linguistically appropriate.

The ideas of Melnick and Zeichner (1997) and Ladson-Billings (2001) can be applied to teacher preparation programs for early childhood education in Singapore. Such programs would explore how preschool teachers define and conceptualise multicultural education; incorporate studies of the history of race relationships; and use case studies and field experiences to provide teachers with opportunities to gain greater knowledge, skills and understandings, not only of their own culture but also of other cultural and language groups in their society. Programs would also provide opportunities for students to engage in critical reflection on their own cultural values, beliefs, practices and prejudices. Most importantly, they should learn how to develop appropriate programs for young children that incorporate experiences to allow children to understand cultural differences and foster relationships between children of different cultural backgrounds.

## Research aim

This exploratory research was conducted with teachers engaged in an in-service professional program in Singapore. Its aim was to investigate teachers' understandings of multicultural education and their perceptions of its importance in early childhood education. It also explores teachers' ideas about their personal and professional experiences with multiculturalism, and the nature of the knowledge and skills required to implement multicultural education programs with young children.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in the study were 58 female preschool teachers in Singapore completing an in-service Diploma in Early Childhood Education. They were working in various private and public kindergartens and childcare centres. The teachers held a minimum of three General Certificate of Education, Ordinary (GCE 'O') level credits from their secondary education, including a credit in English language, as well as a Certificate in Preschool Teaching. Thus, these participants held a minimum teaching qualification for early childhood education and were upgrading this qualification to a Diploma level. Thirteen teachers had less than five years experience in preschools; 25 had between five and 10 years experience; and 20 had more than 10 years experience. The teachers represented different ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese (43 teachers); Malays (9 teachers); Indians (4 teachers); and Eurasians (2 teachers). It can be seen that these participants represent a typical cross-section of preschool teachers in Singapore by racial background as well as type of early childhood programs, kindergartens and childcare contexts.

### Data collection

A questionnaire was designed to identify preschool teachers' understanding of multicultural education in Singapore and their views on what professional education was appropriate for teachers in early childhood education programs. The questionnaire was completed anonymously by the teachers during a class at their training institute and confidentiality of the responses was thus preserved. The questions included what the teachers understood about multicultural education; their understanding about its importance in early childhood programs; and their views on the professional training needs about multicultural education. The questionnaire comprised nine open-ended questions including: 'What does multicultural education mean to you?', 'What experiences have you had working or studying in multicultural environments?', 'How comfortable are you talking about issues of race, gender, abilities and age?', 'How comfortable are you talking with people whose race, gender, abilities and age are different from your own?', and 'What questions do you want addressed in a multicultural education program with respect to teaching children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?'.

### Data analysis

The responses to the questions were analysed inductively because there was no previous research on multicultural education for preschool teachers in Singapore to guide categorisation of the responses. Principles of grounded theory analysis were taken into account in the analysis. Grounded theory is 'a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed' (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This method of data analysis provided a means of developing theory from empirical data, through the 'general method of constant comparison' (Tesch, 1990, p. 40). It takes account of similarities and differences across participants' responses. The unit of analysis of the responses for each question used key words, phrases and concepts which appeared most frequently in the responses as the basis for categorisation.

## Findings

### Perceptions about multiculturalism and children's learning

Most teachers ($n = 55$) had a limited understanding of multiculturalism. They viewed multiculturalism only in terms of race and in the context of Singapore, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*Multicultural comes from the words, multi and culture. As we know that multi means many and culture includes different races like Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians.*

*To me multicultural means of four ethic [ethnic] groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, [and] Eurasian. These groups have and come from different cultures with different beliefs, religions, practices and backgrounds.*

Forty teachers stated that multicultural education meant having knowledge of one's culture as well as other cultures. They believed this knowledge was sufficient and would 'automatically' bring people of different cultures together which would, in turn, result in harmony, tolerance, prosperity and progress for the society. Teachers believed that multicultural education was important and beneficial and that it should begin in the early years, as illustrated in the following quote:

*It is difficult to campaign for this [multicultural education] to society as grown-ups already have a fixed mind set ... the loving nature [for others] has to begin from a young age and nurtured along the path of growth.*

Twenty teachers indicated that children learn prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values from the adults around them, parents and teachers. They expressed beliefs that schools play an important role in educating children about different cultures. One illustrative response was:

*Preschools have the daunting task to promote multicultural education as they are the first place where children has contact with the outside world ... Exposing children at an early age to different ethnics [ethnic cultures] has a great impact on their adult life.*

## Beliefs about teaching for multiculturalism

Twenty teachers thought conducting a multicultural program meant discussing different cultures in terms of their food, dress, festivals, customs, etc. They did not go beyond a 'tourist' perspective in developing an 'anti-bias' approach to teaching and learning about the different cultures, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*When we plan a curriculum we can include different cultural festivals to teach preschoolers the diversity of other races, their traditions, beliefs, and values. Plan a curriculum to help children understand about others.*

*In the curriculum, we can put in their food, festivals, their languages, their ways of life, what customs they follow. Bring in pictures, video tapes or newspaper cuttings to show them the differences (among the cultures).*

Thirteen teachers said preschool centres should treat children of different cultures equally and fairly. Sixteen teachers thought people should believe in multicultural education and be supportive of it, as illustrated in the following quote:

*In preschool, we will accept children from the different races and religious groups. ... We will help children to know the different races and how can be together, accepting each other. Race and religion cannot be a barrier in our intake of children in our preschool ...*

The majority of teachers who had positive experiences in multicultural environments (*n* = 36) or with multicultural people (*n* = 28) were also more comfortable than others without such experiences in discussing multicultural issues (*n* = 17). Some teachers (*n* = 21) had reservations about discussing 'sensitive' issues such as race or religion, as illustrated in the following quote:

*I feel very comfortable talking about issues pertaining to gender, handicap and age. However, race is an issue that I might get uncomfortable talking or sharing about because I would not want to offend. No doubt I have no intention of doing that.*

## Professional learning needs about multiculturalism

The teachers (*n* = 26) understood that they needed to understand more about multicultural education. They said teachers needed knowledge, skills and positive attitudes to know what to teach and how to teach, as illustrated in the following quote:

*In order to teach ... the preschool teacher needs to gain sufficient knowledge through books and through people from various cultural groups. Deep research in the matters and accuracy of knowledge is vastly important.*

The teachers agreed that teacher education programs should include a component on multicultural education and designing multicultural programs for young children, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*What does a multicultural education program mean? How do teachers teach the children under this program? How do we cater to the various needs of the children from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?*

Overall, responses to the questionnaire demonstrated the teachers' apparent valuing of multicultural education for preschool programs. The data also showed no critical or elaborated ideas on the challenges and opportunities to implement multicultural education programs. The teachers did not specifically talk about the importance of personal reflection to understand their own prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values, and how these could affect their teaching and learning. Four participants mentioned that teachers had personal prejudices or biases, but did not elaborate on how to address these issues. The implications of these findings are discussed in the next section.

## Discussion

### Preschool teachers' understandings of multiculturalism

Participating preschool teachers had some understandings of the meaning of multicultural education. While some viewed multicultural education as 'educating', others saw it as 'exposing' people to different cultures and as bringing people of different cultures together. The preschool teachers believed that bringing people of different cultures together, or providing environments for people to interact, would create an 'understanding' or 'knowledge' about different cultures which would, in turn, create harmony, tolerance and prosperity. However, these teachers did not explain how the 'understanding' or 'knowledge' takes place or how it leads to 'harmony', 'tolerance' or 'prosperity'.

According to Robles de Melendez and Ostertag (1997), children's attitudes toward their own and other cultural groups begin to form in the early years. Preschool teachers can influence the development of positive attitudes in young children. Many teachers in this study believed that conducting a multicultural program meant discussing different cultures in terms of their food, dress, festivals and customs. Derman-Sparks and Force (1989) argued that teachers need to go beyond taking a 'tourist' approach and to take an 'anti-bias' and an 'holistic' approach to teaching and learning about different cultures. Teachers can highlight the differences between various cultures; however, they can also note the similarities between cultures in order to build social cohesion (Quah, 2000).

While some teachers in this study were concerned about issues of bias and discrimination in Singapore and in preschools, and wanted these issues addressed, others did not see themselves as having personal prejudices and biases. Banks (2002) noted that a multicultural teacher-training program could help teachers to critically analyse and rethink their notion of race, culture and ethnicity and to view themselves as cultural and racial beings so that they can teach effectively in multicultural classrooms. He adds that it is common for teachers to view themselves as 'non-cultural and mono-ethnic beings who are colour-blind and race-less' (Banks, 2002, p. 89).

### Personal and professional learning for multiculturalism

Many teachers in this research had positive experiences of multiculturalism during their schooldays and at their teacher-training institutes but not necessarily so in the workplace. In addition, the teachers seem to see multicultural experience primarily in terms of race only and in the context of Singapore only. Some teachers had reservations about engaging in discussions on the topic of race, while others indicated that they exercised a great caution when involved in such discussions. Johnson and Johnson (2002) argued that fear, prejudice and stereotyping can be reduced through knowledge, education and support.

The teachers saw the need for more knowledge about multiculturalism and skills development so they know what to teach. However, they were silent on the need for teachers to reflect on their own prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values, and how these would affect their teaching and learning. They also did not mention the need for teachers to work, interact or build friendships with other teachers of different cultural backgrounds. A few teachers did mention that teachers had personal prejudices or biases but did not say what they could do about them or how they could deal with them.

Teacher-training institutes could be places for individuals to learn about different cultures and build friendships with individuals with different cultural backgrounds from their own. Pre-service and in-service teaching programs in early childhood education could examine how preschool teachers define and conceptualise multicultural education and discuss multicultural issues. Programs can provide their students with opportunities to work, interact and build friendships with teachers from other cultural backgrounds (Pate, 2000). Besides equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experience to design and conduct multicultural education programs for the children in their centres, Banks (2002) believes that teacher education programs must help teachers examine and reflect on their own cultural assumptions, attitudes, paradigms, values, beliefs, practices and prejudices.

## Conclusion

This study found that preschool teachers endorsed the need for multicultural education in preschools and believed it was important for children to learn and understand other cultures. The research was conducted in Singapore; however, it has implications for early education programs in other countries. The attitudes of teachers in this study were strongly positive, but there was little in-depth understanding of the challenges that might be encountered in implementing an anti-bias teaching and curriculum approach. There remain important implications for preschool teacher education programs across this national context to support teachers' professional learning so that more critical understandings are developed about multiculturalism and effective practice in early childhood education programs.

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