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Differentiated inclusion, muted diversification: Immigrant teachers' settlement and professional experiences in Singapore as a case of 'middling' migrants' integration

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Abstract

Existing migration research has framed 'middling migrants' mainly in terms of transnational fluidity and flexibility, thus overlooking the issue of *integration*. This article adds to a burgeoning scholarship advocating a more locally embedded perspective (e.g. Meier, 2015b) by investigating the integration of immigrant teachers working in mainstream primary and secondary schools in the Asian city-state of Singapore. It is found that these immigrant teachers faced differentiated formal inclusion with respect to legal settlement, whereas their professional integration experiences also diverged between those who embodied certain 'mainstream' characteristics and those who did not. In negotiating professional integration, 'non-mainstream' immigrant teachers adopted a spectrum of strategies, but on the whole prioritized the pragmatic imperative to 'fit in', resulting in what may be termed *muted diversification*. In terms of broader ethnic and migration scholarship, this account serves to highlight the ways in which locally specific institutional and sociocultural conditions differentially shape middling migrants' experiences in respect to settlement and work. With regard to the Singaporean context, this article fills an empirical gap in migration research while also reflecting on the accommodation and management of diversity in education.

Keywords: middling migrants; mobile middle; migrant teachers; immigration; integration; diversity

Introduction

Migration scholarship over recent years has witnessed a rising interest in the so-called 'middling migrants', sometimes alternatively called the 'mobile middle' or 'middling transnationals' (e.g. Baas, 2017, 2019; Batnitzky, McDowell, & Dyer, 2008; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Ho, 2011, 2014; Ho & Ley, 2014; Jaskułowski, 2017, 2018; Luthra & Platt, 2016; Parutis, 2014; Rutten & Verstappen, 2014; Scott, 2019). According to Conradson and Latham (2005), who are often credited with popularizing the term, 'middling migrants' describe subjects with

> middling status position in their countries of origin. They are often, but not always, well educated. They may come from wealthy families, but more often than not they appear to be simply middle class. In terms of the societies they come from and those they are travelling to, they are very much of the middle. (ibid. p. 229)

In other words, the notion 'middling migrants' refers to a potentially rather wide segment of the internationally mobile population who are in the 'middle' in terms of class positions at origin and destination contexts.

That such a broad and arguably imprecise descriptive category should have gained scholarly currency and momentum is due to, as various scholars have pointed out (e.g. Baas, 2017; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Ho, 2011; Parutis, 2014; Scott, 2019), migration scholarship's tendency to 'focus on social extremes: either highly skilled elites, on the one hand, or low-wage workers on the other' (Scott, 2019, p. 1). This observation applies also to migration research in the context of city-state Singapore – a significant migration gateway and destination city in Asia that serves as the empirical setting of this paper. There, researchers have so far also given somewhat polarized attention to elite migrants (often known as 'expatriates' or 'foreign talent') on the one hand (e.g. Beaverstock, 2002, 2011; Cranston, 2016) and low-skilled transient migrant workers on the other (see Baas, 2017, pp. 52-53, for a summary of an extensive literature), leaving a gap 'in-between' (Baas, 2017). The 'mobile middle' has only recently emerged in Singapore-based scholarship as a budding line of inquiry (e.g. Baas, 2017, 2019). As such, a first overall objective of this paper is to answer various scholars' call for more research to 'consider migrants who are "in-between" the elite and the low-waged' (Scott, 2019, p. 16) by offering an empirical study, specifically concerning immigrants working as teachers in government schools in Singapore.

Regarding the limited body of existing research on the mobile middle, Meier (2015b, 2016) aptly points out a transnationalist analytical tendency that portrays middling professional migrants as 'placeless' (Meier, 2015a, p. 1), thus largely eschewing the *local* contexts and *locally-embedded* experiences of these subjects. As elaborated on in the next section, indeed current studies about middling migrants have accentuated themes of fluidity and flexibility, at the relative expense of the local dimension. In specific, the issue of middling migrants' *integration* in the local setting has remained understudied (though there are some exceptions, see e.g. Jaskułowski, 2018). Thus, the second broad objective of this paper is to contribute to a

more locality-conscious perspective on middling migrants through investigating the question of integration.

Immigrants working as teachers in government schools in Singapore constitute an appropriate empirical case for pursuing the above two objectives. In the first instance, this group embodies many key characteristics of middle-level migrants: well-educated (typically with university degrees, sometimes higher), performing a kind of professional work often quintessentially associated with middle-class social status (i.e. teaching/education), and earning incomes in the medium range. Belonging neither to the elite stratum of handsomely remunerated professionals and expatriates populating Singapore's business skyscrapers, nor to the reservoir of low-skilled and transient labour manning its service and industrial sectors, immigrant teachers' circumstances may reflect the larger pool of migrants who hover in the 'middle', socioeconomically speaking. (More details about this group are provided later.) At the same time, because immigrant teachers in Singapore are employed by the state as civil servants, they work in a predominantly local professional milieu, and interact extensively with local people (students, parents, and colleagues) and institutions (schools, education system, and state). Thus, their experiences also offer a vantage point for exploring migrant-local interactions, and hence, the issue of integration.

In what follows, the next section provides a review of existing research on middling migrants, and sets out a case for investigating integration. Here, necessary conceptual clarification and operationalization are also provided. The empirical context of Singapore as a migration destination is subsequently described. The paper then offers a brief account of the study's methodology, data, and some descriptive findings from the survey. Qualitative findings are subsequently presented in two parts, with the first focusing on immigrant teachers' uneven formal inclusion in terms of settlement experiences and outcomes, and the second delving into their experiences of negotiating integration in the professional setting of the school. The paper's concluding section discusses the ways in which insights from this study contrast with and complement existing scholarship about middling migrants and integration; it ends with some reflections on what it might mean to education in Singapore for migrant teachers' diversification effects to be 'muted'.

Middling migrants in existing research literature

Fluidity and flexibility: a transnational framing

Since the introduction of 'middling migrants' in migration scholarship more than a decade ago (Conradson & Latham, 2005), subsequent research invoking this notion seems to highlight two commonalities in the experience of this otherwise heterogeneous category of migrants: (1) 'class fluidities' (Ho & Ley, 2014), and (2) flexibilities of labour market and immigration strategies. Class fluidities, as Scott (2019) points out recently in a comprehensive review of literature on middle-class migrants, typically result from the problematic conversion – often

involving *devaluation* – of economic/cultural/social capitals across international borders. Both Ho and Ley's (2014) study of middling-level naturalized Canadians of Chinese origin who migrated back to China for career/business opportunities, and Rutten and Verstappen's (2014) study of middle-class Gujarati youth in London, bear out this analysis.

As a consequence of fluidities of class positions, middling migrants are often compelled to adopt flexible strategies with regard to labour market participation and immigration settlement. For example, through a migration trajectory perspective, Ho's (2011) study on well-educated Singaporeans in London found that they flexibly used different visa categories to incrementally extend their stays in the global metropole to achieve their career and migration objectives. Polish and Lithuanian migrants in London, as described in Parutis's (2014) study, also exhibited flexibility in career-making behaviors: they initially settled for 'any job' to stay on in London, while seeking to find 'better job', and aspiring ultimately towards the 'dream job'; along the way, they acquired relevant cultural capitals in order to realize their economic and career goals. Jaskułowski's (2017) research on Indian migrants in the Polish city of Wrocław found that for these middling professionals working in multinational companies, this otherwise peripheral city was mainly seen as an entry point to the rest of EU and the developed world. In all these studies, the middling migrants' circumstances and experiences are predominantly characterised in terms of flux, provisionality, tentativeness and possibilities of further mobility.

Arguably, such emphases on fluidity and flexibility in empirical accounts of middling migrants reflect an entrenched tendency for migration scholarship to frame middling professional migrants in terms of *transmigrants*, namely migrants whose social and cultural orientations do not reference exclusively or mainly the receiving society but traverse multiple social fields (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992). As a result, locality-oriented research problems such as the issue of integration have been somewhat decentered, despite integration being a perennial concern of much migration research. More lately, scholars have begun to take issue with such a one-sided analysis where 'professionals are primarily defined by their incorporation into transnational networks as "transnational elite"' (Meier, 2015a, p. 10). Instead, they advocate for more locally situated examinations of middling migrants' encounters and experiences (Meier, 2015b, 2016).

Towards a local perspective and 'integration': conceptual operationalization

Research that has purposefully sought to situate and examine middling migrants in their local settings has remained limited and scattered. Meier's (2015b) edited volume, for instance, looked at local encounters, identities, and inequalities across a wide range of empirical cases. Jaskułowski's (2018) study found that the workplace and the internet played important roles in Indian professionals' local incorporation in Wrocław, whereas ethnic networks – traditionally considered important – proved irrelevant in his case. On the issue of the local emplacement of middling migrants in general, Scott's (2019) review of literature offers the following observations: '[t]here is no simple process of integration […]. Middle-class labor like all

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migrants, are engaged in a complex process of adaptation within the host country that places them both here and there in terms of their everyday life-worlds they inhabit' (pp. 15-16).

Evidently, research gaps and ambiguities still remain, not least owing to the nebulous conceptual nature of 'integration', and how it is to be operationalized. In this paper, integration shall be treated as a specific *mode* of incorporation (incorporation is taken to mean literally 'becoming part of a society') that does not require migrants' wholesale assimilation into the mainstream culture of the receiving society, but emphasizes inclusion in *formal* and *functional* terms (Bloemraad, Korteweg, & Yurdakul, 2008; Castles, 2002; Schneider & Crul, 2010; Yang, 2017). Formal inclusion is manifested first and foremost in terms of the migrants' *legal* status with regard to immigration and settlement, which in turn often serves as the basis for their participation in mainstream host-society institutions such as the labour market. Thus, the account in this paper shall treat legal immigration and settlement as one key dimension of integration, focusing specifically on immigrant teachers' experiences revolving around pursuing permanent residency (PR) in Singapore.

The second key dimension to integration – the *functional* – can be best examined in the context of the professional setting, where migrants aim to become well-functioning parts of a social system centered on work. In seeking integration in this functional sense, some forms of *conformity* in behaviour and practice are usually necessary; yet, because integration is understood to be a more reciprocal and interactive process than assimilation, migrants also potentially make difference to, or *diversify*, the society, social institution(s), and social group(s) into which they gradually become a part. Thus, this paper proposes that functional integration in the professional setting can be examined with a focus on the tension and balance between *conformity* and *diversification* in the process. Again, immigrant teachers in Singapore schools are a good case in point: while their civil servant status puts pressure on them to conform to the values and norms of the professional setting, they may also be thought of as well positioned to make differences, because their work as educators vests in them the capacity and responsibility to shape the youth of the host society—not only in terms of knowledge transmission but more importantly through influences on intellectual horizons, value orientations and moral outlooks.

The Singapore context: a multiracial destination for middling migrants

Situated in Southeast Asia, city-state Singapore is one of the most economically developed metropolises in the world, and a major migration destination and gateway in the Asia-Pacific region. As of mid 2019, the city-state has a total population of 5.7 million, of which slightly more than 70% (approx. 4 million) were 'resident' population, comprised of about 3.5 million citizens and half a million Permanent Residents (PRs) (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). This puts Singapore among cities/countries in the world with the highest immigrant ratios.

Historically, due to migrations in the 19th and early-20th Centuries under British colonialism (1819-1963), Singapore had evolved into an ethnically and culturally diverse society, made up of an ethnic Chinese majority and notable minority groups from Southeast Asia and South Asia. The post-colonial (1965 onwards) Singapore state made 'multiracialism' an official ideology, aspiring towards a society where the various 'racial' groups maintain their respective community cultures and traditions while coexisting in harmony. Concretely, ethnic and cultural diversities in Singapore came to be governed through the so-called 'CMIO' (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other) framework. One important manifestation of this CMIO institution in education is the bilingualism policy, according to which Singaporeans of various 'racial' groups are expected to learn their respective ethnic 'mother tongues' as a mandatory subject in school in addition to the shared *lingua franca* of English. The three main Mother Tongues (MTs) taught in mainstream/government-run schools in Singapore are Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil; this also creates a substantial need in the education system for MT language teachers.

The CMIO model also holds significance for immigration and integration in contemporary Singapore. Latest statistics in 2019 shows that the racial make-up of the citizen population is: Chinese 76%; Malay 15%; Indian 7.5%; and 'other' 1.5% (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). Sources reveal that this composition has changed little in the past several decades, despite the various 'racial' groups' significantly different birth rates since the 1980s, with those of the Chinese and Indians notably lower than that of the Malays (Nasir & Turner, 2014; Prime Minister's Office, 2019). In fact, scholars (e.g. Yeoh & Lin, 2013) have pointed out that immigration has been calibrated according to the CMIO model so as to maintain the *status quo* ratios, which is believed to be key to social stability and harmony. With regard to immigrant diversity, Singapore is said to adopt mainly an integration framework (Rahman & Kiong, 2013), where the emphasis is more functional and economic, rather than cultural assimilation. The co-ethnicity between immigrants and locals is assumed by the state to help facilitate immigrants' settlement and integration, although growing evidence suggests that there are significant co-ethnic tensions between immigrant and local communities (e.g. Ang, 2018; Ho & Foo, 2017; Liu, 2014; Yang, 2018, 2019).

The close nexus between Singapore's foreign manpower system and immigration regime (H. Yang, Yang, & Zhan, 2017) is also important for understanding the experiences of the mobile middle. Low-wage migrants working in labour-intensive sectors such as marine, construction, and domestic work are typically issued Work Permits (WP)—a type of work visa that offers no pathway to long-term settlement, thus essentially rendering these workers perpetually transient. Mid- and highly-skilled migrants working in professional occupations, on the other hand, are respectively issued the 'S' Pass (SP) or Employment Pass (EP), and are eligible for long-term settlement, through obtaining Permanent Residency (PR) and eventually, citizenship. Latest government statistics reveal that SP and EP holders respectively make up 12% and 11% of the 1.68 million non-resident population in Singapore (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). Currently, the minimum income threshold is 2,300 Singapore Dollars (SGD) per month for SP and 3,600 SGD/month for EP, which more or less correspond to early-career salaries of

diploma-holders and university degree-holders respectively. Baas (2017) has argued that in the Singaporean context the 'mobile middle' consists precisely of these diploma/degree-educated foreign professionals who earn mid-range incomes. According to Baas's study (ibid.) of migrants from India, members of this mobile middle are highly educated and aspirational, but are often rendered precarious by the work visa system, and are having to contend with various constraints while seeking opportunities for a more permanent foothold in Singapore. Echoing this, Zhan and Zhou's (2019) recent study found that among highly-skilled Chinese and Indian professional immigrants in Singapore, employment precarity and settlement uncertainty are commonly experienced, especially by the majority who are not in the high-income range. Stories told by immigrant teachers in this study further corroborate some of these findings.

Immigrant teachers in mainstream Singapore schools: methodology and survey findings

In this study, an 'immigrant teacher' is defined as someone born and/or raised outside Singapore, not educated in Singapore at K-12 stage, and working as a teacher in a *mainstream* Singapore primary or secondary school (thus excluding international schools, religious, and other specialized schools). An immigrant teacher may be a work visa holder, a PR, or a Singapore citizen, hence the phrase 'migrant-background teachers' is also used in this paper. A *Straits Times* news article in 2011 (Ng, 2011) put the number of 'international teachers' in Singapore schools then at 620, or less than 2% of the 31,000-strong teaching workforce at that time. There are no up-to-date figures publically available, although the number of this group and its relative proportion to the entire teaching workforce are likely to have remained at low levels. There has also been virtually no scholarly research into this unique demographic.

To obtain an overall picture of the presence of immigrant teachers in Singapore, the study carried out an online survey, administered in English. Due to the scattered presence of such teachers in the education system, the only feasible method for disseminating the survey was through contacting the principals of virtually all primary and secondary schools in the country. This process eventually returned 144 valid survey responses. Although the sample is not obtained in a strictly probabilistic manner, there is also no reason to believe that it is necessarily biased. Thus, with caution, the survey findings shall be used to make inferences about the immigrant teacher population. In addition to the survey, interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted to garner qualitative insights into these teachers' experiences. Interview and FGD participants were recruited from survey respondents. In total, 23 immigrant teachers (female=16; male=7; China-background=7; Malaysia-background=7; India-background=5; other backgrounds=4) took part in one-on-one interviews—in most cases, two interviews per participant. Two FGDs, respectively involving two and three immigrant teacher discussants, were conducted. Additionally, four FGDs were carried out with local school leaders and teachers to obtain their perspectives. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in English or Mandarin according to participants' preferences. All interviews were fully transcribed in original languages, and coded using the NVivo 12 software.

The online survey explored the immigrant teachers' demographic profile, and asked basic questions about their migration/settlement situations and self-perceived social and professional integration. It is found that the two most significant sources of immigrant teachers in Singapore schools are China (mainland) (n= 65; 45.5% of the sample) and Malaysia (n= 52; 36.4%), altogether accounting for every 4 in 5 teachers in the sample. Nearly 80% of the survey respondents were Mother Tongue (MT) language teachers: among those from China, close to 97% (n=63) were MT teachers, whereas among Malaysians (all of whom were ethnically Chinese), 73% taught MT (Chinese). This contrasted sharply with the remaining teachers in the sample, who were characterised by more diverse backgrounds and teaching subjects. For teachers from India (n=17; 11.9%), nearly half taught non-MT subjects, such as English Literature, Sciences, Social Studies, and History. The rest, whose countries of origin/upbringing included New Zealand, Canada, Japan, etc., also taught a diverse range of non-MT subjects. About 57% (n=82) of the sample were secondary school teachers, the remaining taught in primary schools; but among teachers from China, primary school teachers were the majority (n=39; 60%). A significant majority (n=113; 78.5%) of the sample were female. In terms of age, 84% of sample were aged between 30 and 50, with a mean age of 38.7.

Immigrant teachers in the sample have lived for an average of 14.39 years in Singapore; among them, 30% have lived for 10 years or less; about 60% for 10-20 years; and the remaining 10% for more than 20 years. In general, all regarded themselves as well integrated in Singapore society, giving themselves an average integration score of 4.14 (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the full score). Among teachers from the top-3 source countries, the Chinese's self-assessed integration was slightly below average, compared to above-average scores reported by Malaysians and Indians. These patterns also carried into the immigrant teachers' self-assessed professional adaptation and integration in school: they generally found adapting to local school settings manageable and not too difficult. Chinese-background teachers consistently found it slightly more challenging than average, but the differences between various national origin groups' scores were in fact minimal.

Differentiated inclusion: settlement insecurity and 'PR'-related troubles

Zooming into the teachers' immigration and settlement situations reveal certain distinct patterns that point towards their uneven formal inclusion in the city-state, seemingly differentiated along lines of demographic characteristics and migratory circumstances.

Survey findings show that overall immigrant teachers are well settled in the legal sense: 40% (n=58) of respondents held Singapore Citizenship and slightly more than half (51.39%; n=74) were Permanent Residents (PR), whereas work pass holders only accounted for 8.33%. However, while virtually all China-background (63 out of 65) and Malaysia-background (50 out of 52) teachers were citizens or PRs (thus considered 'resident'), for teachers from India—the largest minority group—7 out of 17 were still holding work passes. Qualitative data further

reveals that for teachers from China and Malaysia, settlement was seldom reported as an issue: none of the 8 Chinese and 8 Malaysian interview/FGD participants mentioned troubles relating to immigration status or difficulties of obtaining PR/citizenship. In contrast, the experiences shared by interviewees of Indian and other national origins were markedly different.

Among the Indian interviewees, two relatively young teachers' experiences had some uncanny resemblances. 'Ajay' (all names are pseudonyms), 32 and single at the time of interview, was from the north-eastern Indian city of Kolkata, and was recruited by the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2011. He had been teaching English Literature at a neighbourhood school for 6 years and greatly enjoyed working and living in Singapore. He appreciated the professional and personal growth that working in the Singapore education system afforded him, and got along very well with his local colleagues, thus regarding himself as very well integrated. He fully intended to settle down in Singapore for the long term, but had had some very disappointing experiences trying to gain a firmer foothold in the city-state. He applied for PR twice, and both times were unsuccessful. What frustrated him the most was the Immigration and Checkpoint Authority's (ICA) practice of not providing any feedback or explanation on PR application outcomes. 'They just say yes or no. So, I don't know what I have to do', lamented Ajay, 'They don't give any reason, […], they just tell you no. Simple as that.' Despite this, Ajay said he would continue to apply. However, things now seemed even less promising: in his most recent work pass renewal, for reasons unknown to him, he was issued an 'S' Pass – considered a downgrade from the Employment Pass that he previously held. Thus, Ajay's chance of gaining the PR was further diminished. Meanwhile, Ajay felt that not being a PR had held him back in various ways, making life harder for him. He suspected that being a 'non-resident' placed him on a different promotion scale, because he got his first promotion only after 6 years, which according to him would normally take just one year for local teachers. Furthermore, being a 'non-resident' also excluded him from any remote chance of accessing government-subsidized housing; renting a place to live was costing him a considerable portion of his monthly income.

Aditi's situation is similar. Also from Kolkata, Aditi was 39 and single at the time of interview, and had previously worked in banking in India before she took a career switch and responded to MOE's recruitment. Since coming to Singapore in 2010, Aditi had spent most of her career teaching History and Social Studies at a neighbourhood school. She also felt that coming to Singapore had helped her grow tremendously as a person and she appreciated living in the city-state. However, her sense of disappointment regarding settlement insecurity and career stagnation sounded even deeper than Ajay. When asked if she wanted to apply for PR, Aditi said: 'Of course I wanted to, and I applied thrice, so the government has rejected me, and they never provide any reason. So I am quite heartbroken.' According to Aditi, failing to get PR 'had played a major role' in her life, as she felt she had been 'losing out' on many fronts, including working in an insecure state of mind, not having adequate insurance/welfare, spending more money on renting accommodation. Just like in Ajay's case, it also took Aditi 6 years to get her first promotion. Aditi also would like to stay on in Singapore and continue working as a teacher, but she felt circumstances were not in her favour: 'If you ask me, whether I'll continue, if I wish

to stay here, settle down here… looking at the current situation, I don't think it's feasible, because I don't have a PR…?' Aditi echoed Ajay in expressing frustration about the lack of transparency of the PR decisions, but she went on to speculate why she was denied this coveted status that would seemingly make a migrant's life in Singapore so much easier:

> So, I don't know, you're asking me (the) reason, I actually have no idea, but yes, I did think about it, it could be because I'm single, it could be because now I'm 39, so that could be reason, I don't know what. I mean because they don't give any reason, maybe I'm not earning that much, maybe they need people who are earning a lot, who are contributing a lot in terms of by paying taxes and all that. So it could be anything, I don't know what. But I'm quite disappointed that I didn't get it. (Aditi)

Immigrant teachers under the 'Other' ethnic category (i.e. non-Chinese/Malay/Indian) reported experiences or troubles that seemed to follow a similar pattern. For example, Naomi (27 and single at time of interview) was born in Japan but, due to relocation following her father's overseas job posting, received all her K-12 education between southern Malaysia and an international school in Singapore before earning her bachelor's degree from the National University of Singapore. At the time of interview, Naomi had taught English Literature for about three and a half years in a neighborhood school and was about to switch to join a more prestigious school. She told the interviewer that she had to endure some anxieties in connection with this job switch because, for reasons unknown, when her new employer applied to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) for her work pass, an 'S' Pass was the outcome, even though Naomi was already holding an EP while working at the neighborhood school. Only after some inquiries followed by an appeal was she eventually granted an EP. This episode highlighted to Naomi the feeling of insecurity while being on a work visa and the desirability of a PR. She had already applied for PR once but was unsuccessful; she intended to apply again.

Cedric's case was particularly revealing because he experienced both the brutal feelings of insecurity due to not being a PR as well as the relief and 'privileges' that followed on the heels of PR obtainment. A Canadian citizen of Eastern European heritage, Cedric had taught in the UK before moving to Singapore to teach History and Social Studies in 2011. He was extremely motivated and excelled at his work; at 35 years old, he had already been made a Senior Teacher. He made his first PR application about 3 years after moving to Singapore while he was still single, and it was unsuccessful. He subsequently married a Malaysian national working in Singapore as a nurse, who became pregnant soon after. Because both of them were neither citizen nor PR, the right of their child—who would not be entitled to citizen or PR status—to stay in Singapore depended on the parents' individual incomes surpassing a stipulated threshold. Cedric recalled the insecurity he endured when an unexpected rise in this threshold threatened their soon-to-be-born child's right to stay with them in the city-state:

> then halfway through my wife's pregnancy, they raised the income threshold, and we're like, now we don't meet it by, like, I think it was by a hundred dollars or something like that. And then they said the kid can't stay, and we're like '*What do you*

mean the kid can't stay?!' So we had to like, you know, appeal, and get my principal to get the MOE director to appeal to MOM director, it was just… In the end, through all the appeals, it was decided the kid could stay, but I just remembered thinking to myself, like, 'What if people didn't have the kind of advocacy we did?' You know, where other people you had to have your kid leave… So, that's a bit of a tough situation to be in, and thankfully it worked out for us. (Cedric)

Despite the eventual solution, Cedric remembered clearly the bitter psychological state he underwent during the crisis period. In his words, what 'soured everything' for him was the thought that he was giving his best to Singaporean children (i.e. his students), yet his own child as a child of a migrant teacher possibly could not stay in Singapore:

Ummm, and then, that really, you know, like 'I do all this work and my kid can't stay here??' Like, you know, and then I'll be helping a student, and it's all for the student, I'll be looking at him and, like, 'I'm doing all this work for you, and my kid…' Like, you know, I was like 'I can't be doing this, I can't do this…' You know, that really affected me for a little bit. (Cedric)

But eventually things worked out well for Cedric and his family. On this second PR application, the entire family, including the small child, applied together and was approved. Following his becoming a PR, the MOE was—in Cedric's words—'aggressive' in offering him permanent establishment because how highly valued he was by his school. With the permanency of residence and now also the security of employment, Cedric and his wife were able to secure a home for the family, and they also had a second child. In the interview, Cedric repeatedly acknowledged he was now in a 'good position', having previously experienced first-hand what it felt to be transient and insecure. He also emphasized that getting PR was the decisive factor.

These few immigrant teachers' frustrated or staggered settlement trajectories, juxtaposed with the absence of troubles from the narratives of mainland Chinese- and Malaysian-background teachers, arguably reflect the effect of Singapore's CMIO ethic framework in internally differentiating middling migrants along lines of ethnicity/race *despite* their otherwise very similar socioeconomic and professional statuses. Moreover, variations in ethnic non-majority immigrant teachers' experiences further suggest there may be other factors at play. When compared with the strikingly similar stories of Ajay and Aditi, the contrasting situations of two other Indian-background teachers were telling. Sudhia (45) and Vani (40) were both already married with children, and came to Singapore as the 'trailing spouse' to their respective husbands who were high-flying professionals (for example, Vani's husband was a lawyer) posted to Singapore. In both cases, the family applied for PR as a group, and were successful on their first attempts, becoming PRs about half a year after arriving in Singapore. Thus, in addition to ethnicity, factors such as marital status, spouse's income level, and presence of children seemed also relevant in 'mainstreaming' middling migrants of certain traits, while leaving those not embodying these traits more precarious with regard to settlement. As evinced from above accounts, such precarity induces in those 'non-mainstreamed' middle migrants subjective

feelings of marginalization and disappointment, which are exacerbated by what Baas has called the '"black box" nature of Singapore's migration system' (Baas, 2019, p. 207).

Negotiated integration and muted diversification: professional experiences

Taking the professional setting of the school as a site for investigating the immigrant teachers' *functional* integration, the study found that interviewees' experiences were divided along broadly the same line demarcating 'mainstream' vis-à-vis 'non-mainstream' immigrant teachers with regard to formal inclusion as reported in the previous section.

The 'mainstream' immigrant teachers – namely those who were predominantly from China and Malaysia, ethnically Chinese, and teaching MT (Mandarin) – tended to frame their professional integration challenges as technical in nature. For example, these teachers commonly mentioned that their weaker command of English hindered them from establishing strong rapport with students and having closer interactions with colleagues, but they were usually quick to characterize such challenges as pragmatic issues that were manageable. Seldom did this majority-group of immigrant teachers see their integration challenges as matters of *difference-making* or *diversification* to the education system, nor did they report experiencing deeper tensions with the system in regard to moral values or cultural norms. Indeed, interview/FGD data shows that Chinese- and Malaysian-background teachers regarded themselves as highly compatible and well-aligned with the prevailing practices and values in Singapore schools. Malaysian teachers routinely cited the geographical and cultural proximity between Malaysia and Singapore – due to shared histories – to explain the absence of notable cultural difference or value divergence for them. Mainland Chinese teachers, on the other hand, tended to emphasize how the Chinese/Confucian values underpinning education in Singapore resonated with their own cultural backgrounds.

In contrast, different voices arose mainly from the small number of immigrant teachers who were 'non-mainstreamed' thanks to their more diverse ethnic, cultural, educational backgrounds and life experiences. These teachers appeared more inclined to experience tensions between personal values on one hand and dominant values, practices, and cultures in the local education system on the other. They were also more inclined to reflect on these tensions and the ways in which they dealt with them. As illustrated next, sexuality education stood out as the most prominent context in which tensions were experienced. It is worth noting that among all the Chinese and Malaysian research participants this topic was never brought up in the interviews/FGDs.

The case of sexuality education

Reflecting official government stance and mainstream societal mores in Singapore, sexuality education in Singaporean schools promotes abstinence and upholds the view that family based on heterosexual marriage is the basic unit of society (Liew, 2014). Thus, for teachers who hold

alternative views, sexuality can be a sensitive and tension-ridden matter. A few non-mainstream immigrant teachers went ahead to reflect on this matter during the interviews.

For example, John (male, 32, Caucasian background), a maths teacher who is also qualified to teach sexuality education, said that he had 'slightly different views' from what the MOE considered promiscuous or risky behaviour, and he 'definitely' had different views on same-sex relationships and 'what can and cannot be allowed', implying that his position was more liberal.

Naomi, too, held a liberal position. She shared:

> For example, with things like LGBT issues. Umm, for me it's like, my personal opinion is that it's a given that LGBT people should have the same rights, umm they should have the right to marry and things like that. But, umm, I was quite taken aback to hear that there are some Singaporean teachers and some students as well who… I think not just based on religious reasons, but for various reasons don't feel that LGBT people belong in society. (Naomi)

Similarly, Ajay (male, 32), the English literature teacher from India, shared that MOE teachers 'have to be very clear about the sense that the heterosexual […] relationship is the basic of the society', something which conflicted with his personal views. When students who self-identified as LGBT opened to Ajay about their sexuality-related struggles and sought advice, he was caught in a dilemma where 'I cannot tell the child "It is ok". Because the child might go back and tell the parents "My teacher say [*sic*] it is ok", then I'm in trouble. But the thing is, I do believe it is ok.' As a result, Ajay felt that he could not give support and guidance to the student in a way that he believed was right.

Hannah (female, 30) was a Singaporean passport holder with mixed parentage, but had been raised and educated mainly in English-medium international schools in a Middle East country. Although Hannah identified as Muslim and wore a *tudung* (i.e. a headscarf), the way she disagreed with how sexuality education is approached in Singapore schools belied her appearance. Sceptical of the effectiveness of simply preaching sexual abstinence to youth, Hannah believed that such an approach was tantamount to avoiding the issue of adolescents engaging in sex. Hannah also came across as frustrated and disappointed about the mainstream heteronormative conception of the nuclear family that continued to serve as the cornerstone of official policies. She recalled, attending one MOE event where a politician reiterated these mainstream and conservative values, she thought to herself 'Oh my god why am I working for this Ministry?'

Integration through adjustment, negotiation, and compromise

The ways in which these non-mainstream immigrant teachers dealt with tensions surrounding sexuality education serve to illuminate their broader approaches towards professional integration. Overall, all were explicit in recognizing their positions as employees of a national civil service, and correspondingly the duties and boundaries expected of them. While none of

the immigrant teachers found themselves fundamentally changing their personal beliefs about sexuality education, in work settings, some came to adjust their stance, some accepted the necessary compromise but entered into subtle negotiations with the system; yet others chose to compromise in a disengaging way.

Brought up and educated in an Anglophone country in Oceania, John used to consider the official MOE approach to sexuality education ineffective in the early days of his teaching career in Singapore. However, gradually, he realized that because of the diversity of Singaporean students' family backgrounds and value systems, a more open and liberal sexuality education approach would almost unavoidably run into trouble. He thus came to appreciate the 'delicate position' that MOE was in, and found himself more in agreement with the MOE's approach nowadays, even though he still did not agree with the officially approved values *per se*.

Naomi equally appreciated the sensitivity of LGBT topics, especially in view of the influence she wielded as a teacher. She stressed that her professional role meant that she must avoid taking a stance:

> So that's something [LGBT] that I very quickly realized, you know, I can't really, like, openly talk about, especially in a government school in Singapore. […] I stand at a position of authority, you know, as a teacher, so I think it's very dangerous for me to say one thing or another when it comes to such issues, I can't openly say "Oh you know we should respect gay people", I also can't say "Oh gay people are going to hell". I can't do either, but I think ummm, I think I am able to, if the students raise such issues, get them to think about it from both sides of the argument? […] my personal opinions may conflict with the Singapore government's opinions, on what is okay and what is not okay, but I think as a teacher I am able to get the students to sort of think about it from all the different perspectives.

In other words, despite making the adaptation and compromise her professional role necessitated, Naomi did not entirely fold under the pressures of official expectations, but took advantage of her role to provide her students the opportunity to think through controversial issues from different perspectives. Thus, her mode of integrating into the local education system was not entirely passive assimilation, but a *negotiative* process. Separately, Naomi also shared that when students expressed interest or curiosity on certain issues—such as LGBT and feminism—she utilised her literature classes to explore these topics through themed literary texts. This approach allowed her to engage students in exploring critical issues that would otherwise be largely absent from the official curriculum. However, unsure whether this approach would be considered 'neutral' by her supervisor, who was reportedly a more conservative figure, Naomi maintained a low profile about her approach.

Some other teachers accepted the necessity of making compromise in order to be in line with the official expectation, but doing so led to a sense of disengagement and powerlessness. Such appeared to be the case for Hannah, as she confessed that 'sexuality education is one of those

things I don't want to be trained in'. Hannah's frustration towards sexuality education reflected her problem with what she saw as a broader culture in Singapore of prioritising consensus over conflict. Hannah noted that early in her teaching career, the preferred approach in her school towards controversial issues was one of avoidance rather than critical dialogue:

> I know that, umm, some of my colleagues and my Singaporean friends, they are very happy to, you know, sweep [things] under and wait for the mountain to grow. […] I'd rather just talk about it […] yah, conversations I think for people [in Singapore] are very scary. Yah, so now I have to be very cautious about when I have conversations with people, because you don't want to offend them and don't want to feel like you are attacking them. (Hannah)

To make things more challenging, as a science teacher, Hannah lacked the avenues that literature or SS teachers had to critically engage students in controversial issues. As a result, making the necessary compromise to fit into a local school felt to Hannah like wearing a 'mask' that concealed her beliefs. Compared to Naomi, Hannah appeared more sceptical about a teacher's agency in negotiating with the system. She felt that despite a rhetoric about teacher as 'change agent', they were not truly empowered to initiate changes on sensitive issues to do with values and norms, such as sexuality education.

Discussions with local school leaders confirmed that there is an expectation of immigrant teachers to 'live up to expectations'. As one local Vice Principal stated during an FGD:

> one thing that has to be very clear, is when you go into the classroom, […] the message should be all in unison, regardless of whether you are a Singapore teacher or you are a foreign teacher. Especially so for the foreign teacher, I think they really have to live up to the expectations […] that the Singapore education system has of all the teachers lah. (Vice Principal A)

In short, immigrant teachers operate under an overall assimilationist expectation from the system. Where tensions or clashes in matters to do with values and norms are felt, these teachers generally have little room for negotiation. Whether the immigrant teachers dealt with such tensions and clashes by adjusting, subtly negotiating, or compromising with a sense of disengagement, they were careful not to let their personal values and beliefs hinder their professional integration in the sense of 'fitting in'. Ultimately, they remained highly conscious of their role as civil servants representing a government ministry.

To sum up, then, immigrant teachers' functional integration in the professional setting of Singapore schools is heavily tilted towards the conformity end of the conformity-diversification spectrum. This is not only because the numerically majority 'mainstream' migrant teachers seemed less likely to embody and/or express divergent values and cultural norms, but also due to the fact that even for the minority of 'non-mainstreamed' migrant teachers, any potentials for bringing value-based diversity to the system were largely thwarted. In short, when it comes

to difference-making in regard to sensitive values, norms, and moral outlooks, the situation for immigrant teachers in Singapore schools may be characterised as one of *muted diversification*.

Conclusion

Looking into immigrant teachers working in mainstream Singapore schools – an under-researched group of professional migrants in the city-state – this paper has provided an empirical study of 'middling migrants' from the Asian context, consciously focusing on the locally-oriented question of *integration*. In doing so, this account makes a contribution to migration scholarship, which has traditionally paid less attention to migrants in-between the elite and low-skilled or, where such attention is given, has portrayed such migrants largely from a transnational frame while eschewing their locally situated circumstances and experiences.

In particular, investigating integration using a two-pronged approach that examines the formal dimension of legal immigration/settlement and the social-functional dimension of professional adaptation and negotiations, this paper has argued that the immigrant teachers' integration situation in Singapore may be characterised in terms of *differentiated inclusion* and *muted diversification*. Despite all being tertiary-educated, professional, middle-level subjects, certain configurations of demographic (e.g. ethnicity, age, marital status, parenthood) and finely-grained socioeconomic differentiations (e.g. household income; spouse's occupation) appeared to be at play to 'mainstream' some teachers while rendering a minority of 'others' more precarious when it comes to long-term settlement. Furthermore, it also turned out to be precisely this minority group of 'non-mainstreamed' teachers who demonstrated differences in terms of value orientations and moral horizons, and hence the potentials to add diversity to the prevailing education system. However, situated in a largely conformist environment of civil service which demanded compromises and negotiations, in the final analysis, the said diversification potentials were minimised and muted.

Insights emerging from this study suggest a number of implications for migration research in general, as well as for the Singaporean context of education in particular. In regard to migration research, several points contrasting with and completing existing scholarship may be observed. For instance, while past research (e.g. Meier, 2015a, 2015b; Scott, 2006, 2019) has already noted the diversity within middle class migration, few has looked into possible divergence in legal settlement outcomes, given that conventional wisdom in migration research views such a divergence as occurring only *across* migrant groups of drastically different socioeconomic positions, not *within* the same class category. What the present study shows, echoing Zhan and Zhou's (2019) recent study about 'talent' migrants in Singapore, is that class-markers such as education/skill level and professional status cannot guarantee against settlement precarity; instead, other factors, criteria and processes – which often remain opaque – may also be at play, leading to finely differentiated outcomes in terms of formal inclusion. This, in turn, serves

to highlight the crucial importance of paying attention to peculiarities of local institutional and sociocultural conditions in seeking to understand migration experiences and outcomes.

This study's findings also add a new layer to Meier's (2015b) explorations of the theme of *inequality* with respect to the migration of professionals, wherein the inequalities between professional migrants and other types of migrants, and that between professionals and receiving society groups are discussed, but little was said of the inequality *within* this group. In the study presented here, despite similar levels of educational qualifications, professional status, and remunerations, a minority group of immigrant teachers were evidently more vulnerable to structural marginalization and insecurity as a result of their 'non-mainstream' characteristics. In research interviews, these teachers occasionally intoned a sense of grievance and resentment about their precarious status and lack of formal inclusion, despite making similar contributions to Singapore education, and society at large, as other immigrant teachers and local teachers. This new layer of inequality may be worth contemplating from an ethical lens of equity.

Lastly, with respect to the Singaporean context, other than filling an empirical gap in migration research by shedding light into a much neglected professional migrant group, this study also presents an opportunity for pondering the accommodation and management of diversity in the Singaporean educational setting. That the vast majority of immigrant teachers taught Mother Tongue languages is evidence that these teachers' diversity in terms of cultural-linguistic capital/expertise is well recognised, and purposefully appropriated. In contrast, the apparently more tension-ridden experiences of the smaller group of 'non-mainstream' immigrant teachers who embodied certain 'out-of-the-box' traits owing to their backgrounds and upbringing, seem to show that diversities in terms of value orientations and moral outlooks are much more sensitively positioned, and not easily accommodated. However, considering that educating students to become cosmopolitan- and critically minded global citizens arguably requires exposure to precisely such diversities, it may be asked whether certain aspects of diversities existing among migrant teachers may be seen as a resource currently under-tapped.

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