

Multicultural Education: An Analysis of the 2020 Primary Social Studies Curriculum

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Abstract

Multicultural Education (ME) teaches learners to overcome differences in areas like culture, ethnicity, and social class. By equipping learners with the cultural knowledge, skills and dispositions to embrace diversity, ME enables individuals to navigate an increasingly complex world. Given the limited local research on ME, this paper examines how elements of ME have been incorporated into the 2020 Primary Social Studies (PSS) curriculum in Singapore. The study revealed that the PSS curriculum comprises a wide variety of multicultural elements. At lower primary, these elements focus on building personal and cultural knowledge. In contrast, at upper primary, such elements are introduced as mainstream academic knowledge. The study further found that the PSS curriculum adopts a contributions and additive approach to implementing ME. However, Singapore's unique ideology of multiracialism also influences the PSS curriculum, placing PSS in tension with social action and transformative approaches to ME. The implications of these findings on teaching and learning are discussed.

Introduction

The Promise of Multicultural Education in Singapore

Multicultural Education (ME) is premised on the belief that all students

should have an equal opportunity to learn in school (Banks, 2019). ME aims to facilitate understanding between diverse groups by restructuring school curricula to enable students to “acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in an ethnically and racially diverse nation and world” (Banks, 2019, p. 11).

Given Singapore's status as a multi-ethnic nation, ME has the potential to nurture citizens who interact skillfully with one another when encountering sensitive or controversial topics. Issues of diversity, such as those relating to race, have been a topic of contention in Singapore recently, as seen from discussions about the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) system (Chua, 2021), the concept of Chinese privilege (Yuen, 2021), and the continued existence of race-based government policies (Lai, 2021a).

Furthermore, Institute of Policy Studies surveys on race, religion, and language have noted the existence of intergroup fault lines (Mathews & Chiang, 2015). These fault lines predate Singapore's independence, with the experience of the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, the 1964 communal riots and the 1969 race riots suggesting that “race can be contributory tinder for public disorder” (Vasu & Ahuja, 2018, p. 31). While race-related unrest subsided after independence, race and racism remain live issues in Singapore society. A 2016 study revealed that almost

half of the Singaporeans surveyed thought of others as racist (Mathews & Pereira, 2020). More recently, in June 2021, a racist outburst by a polytechnic lecturer against an interracial couple demonstrated the risk of latent tensions spilling over into disruptions to the public peace (Lai, 2021b). Racial differences are just one of many points of contention in Singapore society: in January 2021, for instance, LGBTQ activists staged a public demonstration against transphobia in schools outside the Ministry of Education (MOE) Headquarters building, illustrating the rise of sexual orientation and gender identity as terrains of social debate (Ang, 2021).

To help students navigate intergroup differences, Manning, Baruth and Lee have espoused two goals for ME (2017, p. 5):

- “Teach learners to recognize, accept, and appreciate differences in culture, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, special needs, and gender.”
- “Instil in learners...a sense of responsibility and a commitment to work toward the democratic ideals of justice, equality, and democracy.”

Though MOE does not adopt an explicit ME framework, its position towards ME can be gleaned from its Framework for 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes. The framework consists of core values to “shape the beliefs, attitudes and actions of a person” (MOE, 2021a), one of which includes “harmony”, which is exhibited when students “promote social cohesion and appreciate the unity and diversity of a multicultural society” (MOE, 2021a). This is similar to the goals of ME espoused by Manning *et al.*

While elements of ME are found in current initiatives in Singapore schools,

such as National Education (NE) and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), ME represents a conceptual frame for integrating disparate programmes, by ensuring students’ everyday learning experiences reflect the diverse reality of Singapore society. Furthermore, ME moves beyond promoting cross-cultural understanding by also empowering students to work for social justice and transformation. As a construct, ME is both descriptive and prescriptive: it presents a framework for analysing existing curricula, but also proposes interventions for practice and programme design.

Research Study and Objectives

This study leverages ME as an interpretive framework for unpacking MOE’s 2020 Primary Social Studies (PSS) curriculum, while drawing on ME research to propose further refinements to PSS. It aims to answer two questions:

1. What are the multicultural elements incorporated into the MOE’s PSS curriculum?
2. How are these multicultural elements to be taught as suggested in MOE’s teaching and learning packages for PSS?

This study bears a twofold relevance. First, every student undergoes six years of compulsory education, including PSS. Despite this, local research on SS education generally focuses on the Secondary curriculum. Second, literature on ME is often focused on the American experience. As possibly the first study to examine the revised PSS curriculum from the perspective of ME, this paper addresses both these gaps.

To this end, this study involved a qualitative analysis of the PSS curriculum by examining the 2020 PSS syllabus prescribed by MOE. This included categorizing and thematizing the syllabus

according to a synthesized framework (Figure 1) in a chronological order (lower primary to upper primary), to uncover emerging patterns in relation to ME content and ME pedagogical approaches.

Apart from analyzing the syllabus document, the PSS curriculum was also analysed with reference to MOE resources such as the PSS Teaching and Learning Guide (TLG), textbooks and activity books for Primary 1 to 5. Primary 6 materials were not analysed as they will only be released in 2022.

A Synthesized ME Framework for Analysis

Based on the literature on ME, I propose a conceptual framework consisting of two dimensions of ME (ME1 and ME2), which are of particular relevance to teaching ME to young children. Figure 1 shows how ME content can be integrated with pedagogical approaches that scaffold the teaching of ME to suit the needs of young learners. In ME1, content and knowledge construction draws on Banks's Five Knowledge Types (personal and cultural, popular, mainstream academic, transformative academic, and pedagogical knowledge) as the basis for

ME content. In ME2, pedagogical approaches are drawn from Gay (2002), Banks (2019) and Wardle (2009). Each approach helps teachers to decide on how to organize ME content for their lessons, depending on student and teacher needs.

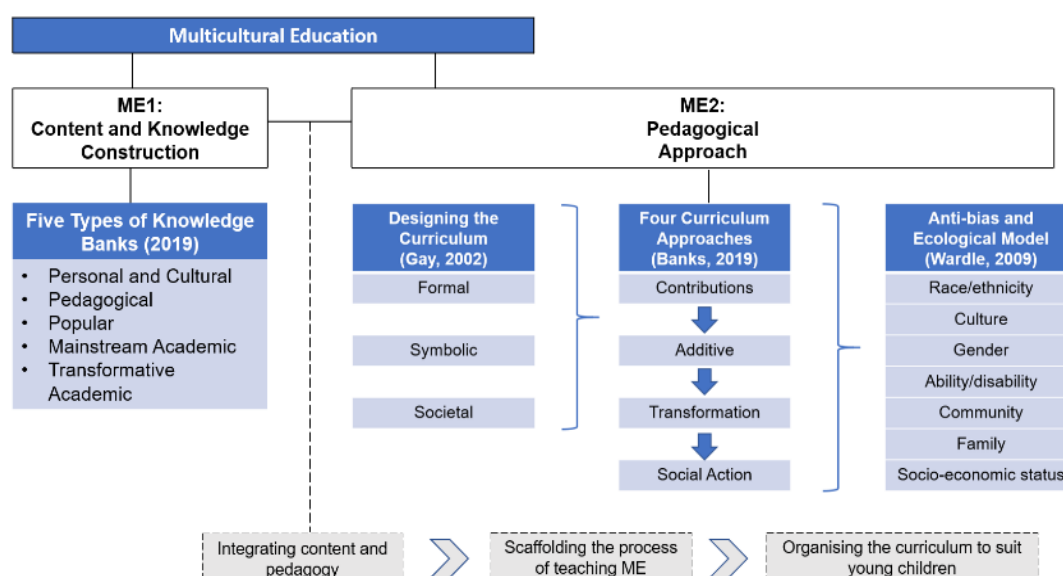
Findings and Discussion

ME1: Content and Knowledge Construction

Based on the analysis of the PSS syllabus document and resources, students are exposed to a wide variety of multicultural elements which promote the teaching of ME for young children from P1 to P5.

In Primary 1 and 2, multicultural elements are strongly present. Primary 1 students are first introduced the concept of personal identity, followed by social identity (i.e. how their identity is shaped by family, friends, and society). For example, the textbook chapters "Please Call Me Priya" and "Fauzy's Hidden Talent" enable students to learn the differences between themselves and others, in terms of aspects of their personal identity (e.g. names, physical features, ethnicity, interests). The

Figure 1: Overview of ME for young children



syllabus extends their learning in Primary 2 to a wider social circle, when students learn to recognise the diversity of Singapore society in terms of different customs and traditions. In the chapter “New Boy on the Block”, students learn about the Chinese New Year festival and its associated practices through the perspective of a Eurasian boy character. Similarly, in the chapter “Experiences that Unite”, students learn about traditional games and snacks, with a focus on stereotypical foods that the different local communities eat. In the activity book, students then complete the worksheet “Celebrating Festivals”, where they match the festivals to a representative image, to help them recognise iconic symbols from such festivals. Such activities shape students’ understanding of customs in Singapore, adding to their cultural knowledge of different groups in the community. These multicultural elements in turn constitute personal and cultural knowledge, which refers to the explanations and interpretations students glean from their own experiences with their family and community (Banks, 2019). Emphasising personal and cultural knowledge at an earlier stage provides scaffolding for students to acquire other forms of knowledge (e.g. mainstream academic knowledge) in the upper primary levels.

In contrast to the lower primary levels, multicultural elements are conspicuously absent in Primary 3, where the learning focus is on the environment of Singapore. Students learn about places in Singapore, the conservation of resources to protect the environment, and responses to the country’s challenges in land, housing and transport. These chapters hone in on individual and collective efforts to enact positive change in the community. As a result, there may be missed opportunities in this segment of the PSS curriculum to account for multicultural elements, as they relate to the natural and built environments. For example, multicultural content relating

to race/ethnicity and inequality in socio-economic status can be explored in the chapter of “From Kampung to Flat”, where students learn about public housing and the communities they live in.

At upper primary, students revisit multicultural concepts like community and culture in greater depth. However, such content is introduced as mainstream academic knowledge, which refers to the theories and explanations of traditional and established knowledge which are internalised and accepted by most university researchers (Banks, 2019). At Primary 4 and 5, students are introduced to historical content, in chapters such as “Lives and Contributions of Settlers in Singapore (1819 to 1930s)” and “The fall of Singapore and the Japanese Occupation”. Students learn about contributions of early settlers (e.g. Tan Tock Seng, Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, Veerasamy Naidu) through the streets, buildings and places named after them. They gain cultural awareness of how places in Singapore have come about, and how racially diverse individuals contributed meaningfully to the country’s development. Various individuals (e.g. Lieutenant Adnan bin Saidi, Lim Bo Seng, Elizabeth Choy and Mamoru Shinozaki) and their contributions during the Japanese Occupation are also surfaced, enabling students to develop an awareness of how Singapore managed the challenges of war. In echoing the orthodox historiography of Singapore’s development, multicultural content evolves from personal and cultural knowledge to mainstream academic knowledge. Nevertheless, the PSS curriculum stops short of imparting transformative academic knowledge, which consists of concepts and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and thus enriches historical and literary conventions (Banks, 2019, p. 80).

Ultimately, multicultural content in the PSS curriculum evinces a traditional

approach to citizenship education (Banks, 2006). This finding is unsurprising in the light of existing research on SS and multiculturalism. In the Singapore context, SS is used by the state to “promote a particular vision of the nation-state, identity-building, and the creation of a sense of historical consciousness” (Ho, 2016, p. 92). For PSS teachers, this raises a profound question: Should multicultural content be used to promote the values underpinning of ME, or should they be used to promote a state-sanctioned version of harmony and multiculturalism? Given the shifting social consensus around such issues, teachers will have to exercise their agency to mediate the tension between these imperatives.

ME2: Pedagogical Approach

In terms of pedagogical approach, the PSS curriculum predominantly adopts a contributions and additive approach. The contributions approach is reflected in the type of content that students learn, such as activities that celebrate holidays, heroes, and special celebrations (Banks, 2019). At Lower Primary, students learn about commemorative occasions like Racial Harmony Day, as well as cultural festivals like Chinese New Year and Christmas. In P4, the chapters “The fall of Singapore and the Japanese Occupation” and “Journey towards Independence” allow students to learn about the various community and political leaders who have contributed to Singapore’s development. By contrast, the additive approach is introduced in P4 and P5, with ethnic content integrated into an overarching national narrative which traces Singapore’s trajectory from past to present.

This approach does not align with “purist” approaches like Banks’s, which call for a social action approach toward ME. This might be partly attributed to the inquiry-based approach taken by the PSS curriculum, which stands in tension with a social action approach. Whereas the social

action approach mainly focuses on students making informed decisions and addressing social issues of their choice (Banks, 2019), an inquiry-based approach focuses on students learning to ask questions, seek answers, and drawing conclusions using reliable evidence. Through this, “inquiry facilitates the students’ own reflective thinking and understanding” (MOE, 2020, p. 52). Instead of a strict focus on promoting social justice, an inquiry-driven approach enables students to develop a deeper understanding of their own personal beliefs and assumptions. “Process-oriented” and “discussion-oriented” (MOE, 2020, p. 52) learning thus diverges from an outcome-focused social action approach.

Nevertheless, an inquiry-based approach can still support the goals of ME, as the PSS curriculum aims to nurture students into becoming critical thinkers capable of making responsible decisions in society (MOE, 2020, p. 51). This is not incompatible with the goal of “(instilling) in learners...a sense of responsibility and a commitment to work toward the democratic ideals of justice, equality, and democracy” (Manning et al., 2017, p. 5).

A reliance on a contributions and additive approach might also be explained by the developmental needs of young children. As Banks’s research on ME mainly focused on young adults, his espousal of a social action approach may not be as appropriate for young children, who may not entirely comprehend the complexities of issues relating to inequality, prejudice, lack of representation, and disenfranchisement (Wardle, 2009). Strictly classifying the PSS curriculum into Banks’s four content integration approaches risks neglecting the need for a process-oriented curriculum for young children, who are still in the midst of understanding their own thinking and beliefs about the world.

Perhaps more significantly, Singapore’s

brand of multiracialism—organized around the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) model—heavily influences the conception of race and ethnicity in PSS. From a ME perspective, such a narrow ascription of culture to race is problematic because it does not take into consideration intra-racial differences. An earlier study on teachers' perspectives towards ME and diversity in Singapore by Alviar-Martin and Ho (2011) found that narrow understandings of diversity fail to capture individuals' unique identities, which may in turn limit transformative ME. They note that the "CMIO model hinders multicultural education by subsuming citizens into four racial groups, disregarding nuances of identity based on linguistic, religious, or cultural affiliations, and overlooking the unique identities and experiences students bring to schools" (p. 133).

The application of the CMIO model onto multicultural elements in the PSS syllabus is apparent as early on as in Primary 1, where students are implicitly introduced to the four main races via the Big Books, which are reading materials used to explore concepts through engaging storylines accompanied by visuals. Each Big Book in P1 corresponds to a main character who is racialised as either Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian. The stories revolve around the main characters: Priya (Indian), Fauzy (Malay), Jamie (Chinese), Edward (Eurasian), Jessie and John (Chinese). As such, students are implicitly introduced to multiracialism in terms of the four main races of Singapore – Indian, Malay, Chinese and Eurasian. Although these materials are useful in providing for a fair representation of most students in Singapore, it fails to represent students from inter-racial households. This phenomenon is seen again at upper primary, with students learning the contributions of early settlers, where each respected contributor belongs to one of the four major racial groups of Singapore. Hence, there is an overt focus on applying the CMIO model

when explicating the concept of race/ethnicity in the curriculum.

The conflation of race and culture also appears in Primary 2, where students have to identify the customs and traditions that belong to the different communities in Singapore. For example, students learn about various multicultural festivals like Hari Raya, Pongol, Christmas, Easter and Chinese New Year. However, such festivals may easily be misunderstood as racial festivals in Singapore. For example, Chinese New Year is celebrated by the Chinese in Singapore, Hari Raya is often celebrated by Malay-Muslims, and Pongol is often celebrated by the Tamil-Hindu community. As such, there is a risk that multicultural festivals may be framed as stereotypically racial events.

Furthermore, the link between one's racial identity and stereotypical cultural markers is also made apparent and reinforced through the suggested activities in PSS. For example, under the chapter "Please Call me Priya", students have to complete a follow-up activity worksheet titled "Knowing Myself". In this worksheet, they are introduced to stereotypical foods that belong to each race, like roti prata, chicken rice and satay, and are required to select their favourite food from this list (and if not, to suggest their own). Since this chapter also focuses on identity, students may be led to believe their racial identity is clearly connected to a particular cultural food as suggested by the textbook. Hence, there is a possibility that students ascribe cultural foods to one's race, which is problematic from an ME perspective as it promotes a narrow definition of one's identity.

The continued influence of multiracialism on the 2020 PSS curriculum constitutes a major factor for the lack of a transformative academic approach in the PSS curriculum. This points to the instrumental role that teachers play in either

maintaining or debunking the equivalence between multiculturalism and multiracialism. It falls on PSS teachers to be mindful of the nuances of identity before teaching chapters that engage with “race/ethnicity.”

Considerations for Teaching and Learning

Based on the above discussion, a curriculum that implicitly takes its understanding of multiculturalism as multiracialism could affect how teachers deliver the content of ME to their students. Ho, Hong and Gilbert (2017) question if it is adequate for teachers to teach ME based on superficial and outdated understandings of multiculturalism, especially when one considers that the student population is becoming more diverse, with students from mixed-race families and immigrant homes.

Studies by Banks (1991) and Okoye-Johnson (2011) suggest that ME has the potential to bring about positive changes in students’ racial attitudes. In Singapore’s context, a transformative approach to ME could play a pivotal role in correcting misconceptions about race and culture in Singapore. In order to do so, teachers first need to be aware that multiculturalism in Singapore is heavily influenced by the notions of multiracialism, and then refine their own understandings of multiculturalism to avoid conflating multiculturalism and multiracialism.

Furthermore, teachers should be mindful of the limitations to a traditional approach to citizenship education in the PSS curriculum. According to Banks (2006), globalisation has brought about more diverse individuals whose loyalty cuts across various dimensions. Consequently, “multicultural citizenship” (Kymlicka, 1995 as cited in Banks, 2006, p. 194) might be a more realistic goal, as it acknowledges that citizens have overlapping commitments to their own cultures as well

as the nation state. Hence, PSS teachers should consider the demographic profile of students in their classes before teaching chapters that espouse national ideals.

Finally, the overt focus on a contributions and additive approach makes students aware of diversity, without necessarily transforming their thinking towards multiculturalism. As such, teachers can consider adopting a transformation approach, where appropriate, in order to encourage students to become critical thinkers. For example, teachers may integrate transformative knowledge by conducting inquiry-based discussions about local social issues, such as racism and discrimination against persons with disabilities, where more contemporary case studies of intolerance have surfaced. For example, these activities could be introduced in P5, as an extension to the chapter on “Building a Cohesive Society”, after students have learnt about historical race riots in Singapore. Such discussions could aid students in developing transformative knowledge, as students learn how to show respect and appreciation for diversity in cultural practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study had revealed the ways in which the PSS curriculum incorporates ME, with a wide range of ME elements being promoted and appropriately selected for primary school students. However, these elements are limited as they only provide a glossary view of what “multicultural” means—a longstanding trend which has yet to be broken in the local SS curriculum. Ultimately, PSS is constrained by the national outlook, as it draws upon notions of multiracialism and falls back on the narrative of a nation-state vulnerable to racial tensions in order to highlight the importance of racial harmony. If teachers neglect other aspects of multiculturalism, this could potentially impede the effectiveness of ME and the

achievement of its goals. Hence, greater teacher support is needed to ensure effective delivery of ME in the PSS curriculum, such that teachers themselves become more conversant with issues of multiculturalism, and not limit students' understanding of multiculturalism to multiracialism. This would, in turn, pave the way for the goals of both ME and PSS to be achieved.

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