

Singapore is a living, breathing example of a multicultural society. Associate Professor **Rahil Ismail** explains why and how Singaporeans manage to live with differences.

“OUR SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON OUR ABILITY TO *live* **TOGETHER”**

By CAMILLA MEHLSSEN

** What is special about the diversity in Singapore?*

“Singapore is very fortunate because we do not have to leave the country in order to learn from, gain access to and come into contact with people who are different from us. It is all here. It is a living, breathing example of diversity. In most schools, with this highly diverse population, you have an instant learning environment in the classroom. I think there is a great potential in the informal context in which these different groups of people come into contact; you learn about the other in informal ways.”

How exactly do the students meet diversity in the classroom?

“You might get to sit next to someone who is different from you. If your good friend happens to be someone of a different race, different faith or different gender, you get invited to their homes. So there is an informal, but also authentic interaction across groups of people.

You have the opportunity to learn about the other living in our midst in hopefully authentic and natural conditions, where you do not see things as a tourist gone abroad or through a ‘National Geographic-approach’ with documentaries etc. When you get to know a person in an authentic setting, you can see that this person is

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both similar and different from you. This probably also adds to the children’s growing knowledge that there is a bigger world out there. It is not just their world. It is fundamental for their understanding, not just of the Singaporean context but human conditions as well.”

How come Singapore manages to live with differences?

“It is not easy. It takes hard work. It takes consistency. It takes vigilance. I am using all these so-called coded phrases – and people can say that they come out of government propaganda. But, you cannot look at Singapore and say: ‘Oh, it is just playing happy family’. No, there are



✖ Children wear red shirts and carry colorful flags during the National Day parade in Singapore.

issues, there are differences. It took a lot of time, effort and vision, and it took a lot of negotiation between the different groups. Fundamentally, over the years, all of us understood that peaceful co-existence benefits everybody.”

Singapore has experienced racial riots in the 1960s. How would you describe racial tensions today?

“I joke when I say that there are no problems in Singapore – there are only challenges. Everything is not just wonderful. There are certain issues that you have to accommodate if you want to live with so many differences on the island. I do not say that these differences do not bring about unfortunate outcomes, and we have had unfortunate outcomes before in terms of racial conflicts, as we like to tell our kids: ‘This is the result if you don’t have understanding and tolerance for the other’. Actually, this is one of our greatest concerns. Our younger generation has known nothing but peace and prosperity. We are concerned that they think it has been pretty easy, because it has not. Every day there are issues and

What is the biggest challenge to multicultural education today?



Associate Professor
Rahil Ismail

“The notion that ‘multicultural education’ is a trendy form of education that can somehow be ‘learned’ and ‘exhibited’ without fully committing oneself to understanding and institutionalizing the essence of multiculturalism as a form of national and personal growth for social justice and collective good is one of the biggest challenges today. Additionally, the current political trend in declaring the death or failure of multiculturalism provides fertile ground for the rise of forces that can only spell major setbacks for multicultural education and its proponents.”

affairs that may seem minor but can have massive ramifications. This is where the education system comes in to sustain a certain level of vigilance. Education is trying to impress on the kids that we need peaceful co-existence, not just because it is better for us, but because there is something about difference that we can all celebrate.”

What do the teachers in Singapore do that might be different from teachers in other countries?

“One of the great things about teachers in Singapore is the mean age is pretty low. All the teachers have been socialized into thinking in the Singapore way of functioning with differences. When they go into the classroom, they basically know what is expected of them as a citizen in Singapore. They are supported by two things: First of all, they are complemented by Ministry of Education-directed policies and syllabuses, which include actions that try to promote understanding.

Secondly, the teachers have been trained within the National Institute of Education

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(NIE) to think about multiculturalism in all its complexity. It is not simply a case of ‘I like you and you like me and we are together’. They are trained to think about multiculturalism in terms of, for example, power dynamics and political policy impact. So, it is not a set of rules that the teachers follow.

Furthermore, I like to think that our teachers want to ‘do good’. Yes, we have been socialized into thinking that our survival depends on our ability to live together. But it is also a matter of fully understanding what being together means. My area of research is trying to move that level of tolerance into a much greater and meaningful standing. I want a much more meaningful understanding of multiculturalism and multicultural respect among our teachers and among our young people. This can be a further refinement or complementary action coming from the top-down. Multicultural education should be a fundamental component of any person’s education.”

Is there a gap between policy and practice when it comes to multicultural education?

“There are gaps depending on the particular issues you look at. In some areas I think we are doing very well. In other areas I think we could do so much better, for example in the area of going beyond tolerance to understanding. On a societal level, we can do so much better in coming to terms with the fact that our demographic landscape is changing. Globalization has an impact on us, and the inclusion of certain communities needs to be understood in terms of respect and inclusion.”

Who exactly do you have in mind?

“Here I am talking about the Singaporeans’ attitude towards workers predominantly from South Asia, such as male construction workers or domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. In Singapore we do have advocacy groups who try to get us to think in terms of how we can be more inclusive. But we still have to work on that. Our children need to understand that the impact of globalization means that we are interconnected with the global economy and with global humanity. We have only seen difference within our own people: Chinese, Malay, Indian and the Eurasian. Singapore has always been a global city, but the pace of globalization has had a great impact on Singapore. Today we have issues like the perceived growing inequality and the introduction of new communities. We really need to consider how we relate to these new communities. As with other countries around the globe we are learning. Fortunately, we do have schools that move in that direction and bring in views on what it means to be a global citizen. ■



RAHIL ISMAIL

Dr. Rahil Ismail is Associate Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Her current research and publishing interests are in international relations, multicultural studies and heritage studies. She is the author of the IALEI country report on multicultural education in Singapore.



CHINA

Professor **Zheng Xinrong**,
Faculty of Education, Beijing
Normal University

China has a rich historical experience in dealing with cultural diversity. Today, there are many successful experiences, such as to give minority students concessions in admission to higher education. The Constitution and laws ensure minorities the right to use their mother tongue in school education and the Government provides educational resources for minority students at all levels.

GREAT BRITAIN

Professor Emeritus **Heidi Safia Mirza**, Institute of Education,
University of London

There are no outright winners in terms of successful multicultural educational policy – the learning curves of multicultural initiatives are steeped in small gains and wide limitations. To give an example, ‘Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils’ was a national strategy geared towards improving the achievement of black Caribbean students who were seen as the persistently underachieving. The programme was a pilot and focused on only a few select schools. It promoted a ‘whole school’ approach advocating a transformation of the school ethos so all staff and students would value diversity and the validity of improving black and other ethnic minority achievements through high expectations. The programme established the importance of constant analysis and monitoring of data on ethnic minority achievement so problem areas could be identified and dealt with immediately. However, the programme suffered from a number of shortcomings. The evaluation highlighted the hidden problem of entrenched ‘colour-blind’ ideas in schools,

which advocated treating all students alike as the way to eliminate discrimination and inequality. It also highlighted the core problem of teachers' negative stereotypical views on black identity and underachievement, which is known to disadvantage black Caribbean students. However, overall the programme had a positive outcome as it officially pinpointed the need for continuing professional development and awareness-raising for teaching staff concerning issues relating to race equality, diversity, inclusion and improving achievement.

DENMARK

Associate Professor **Christian Horst**, Institute of Education, University of Aarhus

Intercultural education and multicultural education do not enjoy a recognized position as professionalized educational concepts related to laws or steering documents in Danish educational policy. Over the years, a number of local initiatives have tried to engage with this type of education, i.e. to leave exotic celebration of cultural differences behind and integrate ethnic complexity in the organization of teaching. Yet, such initiatives are very vulnerable due to changing priorities in local policies.

USA

Professor **Amy Stambach** & Assistant Professor **Aydin Bal**, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI) is a good example. MSLI is a four-week-long summer residential program for migrant students. Its goal is to help immigrant students develop the skills and competencies needed to enter into higher education and to assist them in reflecting on and directing their own personal

and shared experiences as immigrants and as non-dominant students. The institute provides students with an opportunity to think through and address some of the common issues that many minority Americans, particularly African American and Latino students, face.

If we narrow down from MSLI's overarching philosophy of inclusive education to look at the elements taught in a particular subject, we see a rich integration of cultural issues into the curriculum. One of the significant genres of the critical literacy curriculum of the institute is *testimonio*, written and oral autobiographical accounts. Participating students share – and rewrite – their testimonio across a various range of reading, writing and performance-based activities. The curriculum comprises other genres and activities with multiple structures such as comprehension circles, whole-class discussions, writing conferences, *teatro*, tutorials and student presentations and performances. Those activities are designed to facilitate deep learning through collective experience and identity formation.

This critically designed sociohistorical theory-based programme has created positive outcomes for students who, in other settings, have experienced clear inequities.

To give an example, several students who were otherwise at risk of academic failure (i.e. dropping out) successfully completed high school and were accepted into UCLA and other prestigious universities. But more importantly, for multicultural educators whose major goal is to change the structure of the educational institutions, the MSLI demonstrates the possibilities of designing effective and transformative learning environments for non-dominant students who highly value their cultural background.

BRAZIL

Professor **Helena Coharik Chamlian**, Faculty of Education, University of São Paulo

A noteworthy example occurs in the awareness of the Brazilian population concerning the problem of the indigenous people. In São Paulo, the State Government has engaged in the training of indigenous teachers who will teach in the communities of the five ethnic groups present in the State (Guarani, Tupi-Guarani, Kaingang, Terena and Krenak). In 2003, the State trained indigenous teachers to work with the initial grades. The course was taught by teachers

BEST CASES

What is a good example of multicultural education in your country? The IALEI magazine has asked some researchers from the **joint project 'Multicultural Education'** to describe a best case.

hired by the Faculty of Education, University of São Paulo. According to the State Secretary of Education, 81 Indians of the five ethnic groups, who already worked as teachers in all 28 hamlets in São Paulo, filled the places, without the need for an entrance examination. The course also trained the teachers to teach 5th to 8th grades. In practice, such training meant that the students of the hamlets could conclude the Elementary Education with indigenous teachers, which represents a great advancement in the maintenance of the culture of each ethnic group. It taught didactic notions, philosophy of the education, Portuguese and Tupi-Guarani languages as well as indigenous culture, which turned out to be crucial for maintaining the cultural traditions. Another good example is the compulsory inclusion of African history and African-Brazilian culture in the curricula of the Brazilian schools, both at the elementary and the high school levels.

SOUTH KOREA

Professor **Hi-Won Yoon**, Seoul National University

"Korean parents and teachers are very progressive in considering the fact that the students from multicultural families are taken care of in advance to get a job or college admission.

Korea has many religious institutions (churches and temples) and NGOs that offer their support to the students from multicultural families."

SINGAPORE

Associate Professor **Rahil Ismail**, National Institute of Education, Singapore

"A good example: a consistent emphasis and infusion of national multicultural ethos at every level of the national education system through official and semi-official means." ■