

Report prepared for the Remaking Singapore Committee on
“Beyond Club - Ethnic and Religious Cohesion”

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Remaking of Singapore

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Abstract

Multiculturalism can hold great potential wealth in terms of developing our economic, social and cultural capital. In negative terms, multiculturalism can become a threat to social cohesion. For Singapore to develop a stable, cohesive and peaceful society amidst the many cultures that co-exist it becomes even more critical to facilitate healthy and positive cross-cultural exchange. This paper highlights the social and economic benefits to Singapore when the potential of multiculturalism is tapped within and beyond the existing framework. It also discusses the likely outcomes for Singapore and its people if cultural competency is neglected. The recommendations of this paper suggest how multiculturalism can be better understood and further developed within the everyday contexts of cross-cultural exchange, especially schools, workplaces and local communities.

Key Recommendations

The paper recommends that the Ministry of Education (MOE) should delink second language requirement from ethnic background/mother tongue sufficiently so that students can choose any of the major languages in Singapore as their second language and that MOE should reconsider the examination score criteria for students' eligibility to take a third language. All students irrespective of examination scores in English and mother tongue language should be encouraged to take a third language for social interaction and exchange.

Rationale

1. Multiculturalism in Singapore is celebrated for enriching society with its diverse histories, cultures and traditions through rituals attached to the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others framework, and officially sanctioned through a set of legal and administrative measures.

2. As a positive condition and value, multiculturalism bears with it tremendous economic, social and cultural capital and benefits.

2.1. Multiculturalism gives Singaporeans a sense of equal opportunity, identity and belonging. Equality and opportunity for all under multiculturalism enables the development of Singaporeans' potential to the fullest.

2.2. A culturally diverse population that coheres and is culturally competent about diversity is necessary and desirable for stability, peace and enrichment.

2.3. Such a population is also necessary and desirable for Singapore's globalised economy, particularly for attracting foreign investment and interacting with foreign talent as well as for cultural tourism.

2.4. Equality and opportunity for all under multiculturalism makes Singapore an attractive place to work and live in for both locals and foreigners.

3. In a negative condition or set in a negative context, it can be conflictual with a potential threat to social cohesion through overlapping race, language, culture and religious

divides. Multiculturalism is often portrayed in official and public discourse as inherently unstable and needing careful management “lest the racial riot ruins the precarious peace”.

4. In the remaking of Singapore, a review of its state of multiculturalism is relevant for the following reasons:

- 4.1. Current political and religious developments at the global, regional and local levels heighten official and public focus on the potential of multiculturalism for the conflictual and the negative.
- 4.2. Problematic areas of intergroup relations directly affect the social cohesion, peace and harmony for economic and social development.
- 4.3. Growing careless and insensitive referencing to race, culture and religion heightens ethnic identities negatively.
- 4.4. A dominant culture of mere tolerance and conflict avoidance maintains peace but is insufficient for social cohesion and development in the face of inter-group tensions and negative emphases on diversity’s differences.
- 4.5. Belief in the equality and opportunity for all under multiculturalism needs strengthening and reinforcement in the face of growing social divides.
- 4.6. The economic, social and cultural capital of multiculturalism is being depleted, under-developed or under-utilised.
- 4.7. Singaporeans in general lack cultural competence and openness to navigate through a multicultural economy and community at the local, regional and global levels.
- 4.8. With growing diversity, the categories of race, ethnicity, culture and religion are increasingly non-synonymous (you mean perception of being exclusive) even if actual overlaps exist.
- 4.9. The potential of multiculturalism within and beyond the existing ethnic framework can be tapped and developed to enhance Singapore’s economic and social conditions and Singaporeans’ roles and participation locally, regionally and globally.

5. Cross-cultural exchange stands out among the many arenas of multiculturalism that requires review and attention in view of the above.

- 5.1. Cross-cultural exchange encompasses socialisation, education and interaction among individuals and groups of diverse cultural backgrounds.
- 5.2. It involves formal and informal, and spontaneous and planned processes of interaction at many sites of exchange such as in homes, schools, neighbourhoods, work places and public places.
- 5.3. Cross-cultural exchange in information, knowledge and ideas provide dynamic and powerful avenues for the development of multiculturalism’s economic, social and cultural potential and benefits.
- 5.4. It goes beyond mere tolerance to engage in processes of understanding, acceptance, appreciation and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and values.
- 5.5. It builds cultural competence in negotiating cultural similarities, differences and potential conflict, and in constructing new cultures.
- 5.6. It is a direct arena for the practice of the positive values of multiculturalism towards stability, peace and development.
- 5.7. Cultural knowledge is a source of information and creativity in knowledge-based production.

Needs and Policy Gaps in Cross-cultural Exchange

6. Cross-cultural exchange needs to be built into regular and on-going processes of interaction both spontaneous and planned. Current attention paid to cross-cultural exchange,

while necessary and commendable as starting points, are largely reactive responses to negative events such as the September 11th tragedy and the arrests of Jemayah Islamiah and their perceived negative fallout on ethnic relations.

7. The promotion of cross-cultural exchange requires pro-active, focused and sustained efforts and programmes, besides single or one-off events. Opportunities and resources for cross-cultural exchange are lacking in general in:

- 7.1. Direct programmes, for example, student exposure and exchange programmes.
- 7.2. Research
- 7.3. Literature

8. Current programmes and activities lack sufficient focus on key target groups such as young children, youths, parents, educators, human resource personnel, community development officers, and other professionals who work directly with specific ethnic client types or whose work directly involves cross-cultural interaction or affects ethnic relations. The following are examples:

- 8.1. School educators such as teachers and principals need cultural sensitivity and competence to educate and relate to students of diverse backgrounds.
- 8.2. Parents need cultural knowledge and competence to raise their children in an increasingly multicultural world.
- 8.3. Community development personnel and organisers need cultural competence to develop relevant cross-cultural programmes for children and youths in local settings.

9. In the educational field in particular, cultural curiosity is under-tapped and under-developed in policy and programme/activities at all levels, from the pre-primary to the tertiary. The following are examples:

- 9.1. At pre-school and primary school levels, children's natural curiosity and drive for interaction are insufficiently tapped for cross-cultural socialisation, education and interaction in classroom curriculum and extra-curricular activities.
- 9.2. At secondary school level, the policy of limiting third language learning only to students who have scored distinctions in English and their mother tongue in the PSLE examinations is misguided. The promotion of cross-cultural exchange through language learning should be for all, not limited by the criteria of exam scores.
- 9.3. At the tertiary level, cross-cultural exchange in multidisciplinary curriculum and training for students and the development of intellectual capital in cross-cultural studies lack attention.

10. The current ethnic composition of students in some schools and school types do not provide the conditions that are conducive for diverse cross-cultural exchange.

11. The current requirement of students to take their "mother tongue" language as their second language is a constraint on cross-cultural exchange through language learning and use.

12. There is insufficient attention paid to the economic, social and cultural resources inherent in multiculturalism for economic development and for developing Singaporeans' competences.

13. The complementarity of Singapore's cultural diversity with other social and cultural resources in the South-east and Asia-Pacific region is largely unrecognised as economic and cultural potential.

Recommendations

Short Term Recommendations

14. Identify the key sites, target groups and opportunities/needs for cross-cultural exchange. Examples are:
 - 14.1. Play and interaction activities for young children.
 - 14.2. Cross-cultural knowledge and sensitivity programmes for parents, educators and community development officers.
 - 14.3. Immersion, exposure and exchange programmes for students' cultural sensitivity, exposure and exchange programmes for working professionals and businesses.
 - 14.4. Home teams for games and home-visits and home-stays for children and youth in local settings.
15. Schools with student populations that are predominantly of one ethnic background, such as the Special Assistance Plan schools and madrasahs, should consciously explore and develop programmes and activities to maximise cross-cultural exchange.
16. There should be programmes and activities, besides one-off events, for sustained interaction and exchange. Schools, CDCs, youth organisations and other organisations with direct cross-cultural exchange programmes in particular should bear this in mind.

Recommendations for Medium Term and Beyond

17. The Ministry of Education should delink second language requirement from ethnic background/mother tongue sufficiently so that students can choose any of the major languages in Singapore as their second language.
18. The Ministry of Education should reconsider the exam score criteria for students' eligibility to take a third language. All students irrespective of exam scores in English and mother tongue language should be encouraged to take a third language for social interaction and exchange.
19. Cultural content within the second language curriculum can be extended beyond the culture associated with that language to include other cultures within and beyond the Chinese, Malay and Indian framework.
20. Cross-cultural studies, with relevant curriculum developed for each level of education, should be made compulsory or highly recommended for students. Examples are:
 - 20.1. Major world cultures and world religions for primary and secondary school students.
 - 20.2. Modules on cultures and societies and on cross-cultural issues in multidisciplinary studies for university students.
21. Encourage the development of literature and curriculum for cross-cultural education programmes.
22. Invest in basic and applied research on issues of multiculturalism and on local and regional cultures. Encourage and develop cultural studies and research through funding and support facilities through the establishment of a National Academy of Social and Cultural Studies.

23. Encourage and enable an environment that is multicultural both within and beyond the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others model; one that is socially and culturally vibrant.

24. Encourage and facilitate cross-cultural exchange and collaboration locally, regionally and globally among educational institutions, between educational and other relevant social organisations, and among relevant social and business organisations.

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