

## **Diverse Picturebooks for Diverse Children: The *Others* in Singapore Teachers' Discourse and Pedagogy**

This study investigates how teachers construct the *Others* in their use of diverse picturebooks for diverse children. Data from open-ended learning prompts and focus group discussions with in-service teachers in Singapore reveal their conflicted discourse and practice in relation to using diverse picturebooks in the classroom to promote inclusive education. On the one hand, the teachers navigate their way around an “awareness of Others” but, on the other hand, they also express discomfort towards an expanded definition of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” in a relatively tightly controlled educational context. This paper aims to surface the multifaceted nature of teachers’ newly-found openness to broader and more inclusive notions of Others, conflicted but also actively compartmentalizes different discourses in order to make inclusive classroom practice possible.

Keywords: professional development, culturally responsive pedagogy, graduate education/graduate programs

There has been a subtle but increasingly expanding change in the demographics of student populations in the world over the past years (Chong & Cheah, 2010). In fact, today's classrooms are now described to be increasingly heterogeneous and diverse as brought about by migration, immigration, and remigration (Auzina, 2018). Thus, schools are now perceived to serve as a "major arena for interethnic contact and the formation of interethnic relationships" (Schwarzenthal et al., p. 260). As today's classrooms become even more multilingual and multicultural, there is a greater call for more inclusive and in-depth approaches (Irvine, 2003), which include a focus on integrating multicultural literacy experiences for both students and teachers (Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009; Taylor & Hoehsmann, 2011). An examination of multicultural children's literature from a critical literacy lens encourages teachers to become better-informed risk-takers in approaching complicated issues connected to the many aspects of diversity (Muschell & Roberts, 2011). Furthermore, teachers who use a critical literacy approach are in a position to empower young people "to *read* both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge skills, tools and resources. It is also about *writing* and rewriting the world: it is about design and re-design" (Janks, 2013, p. 227; emphasis in original). Thus, it pushes teachers to rethink their own assumptions about teaching and learning, as well as to embrace the voices of those who might be considered "Others," who have been marginalized in literature and in society in general. In doing so, however, teachers contend with conditions and ideologies which complicate their embrace of Others in and through multicultural children's literature. In this paper, we map out the teachers' conflicted discourse on Others as they develop sensitivity to inclusive classroom resources and practices.

In its broadest sense, the Others are people, communities, cultures and ideologies which have been traditionally "left out" (Tschida et al., 2014, p. 28) in

classrooms, literature, history and social theory because of their fixation on white, middle-class and male experience (Hall, 1992; Hill, 2015). Women and non-male sexualities (Crisp et al., 2018), people of colour (Koss, 2015), working class people (Kelley & Darragh, 2011), and people with disabilities (Elhoweris et al., 2017; Emmerson et al., 2014) are among those underrepresented in children's literature, thus the need for diverse picturebooks to rectify such historically and ideologically shaped injustices (see below) in order to surface a much richer experience of humanity through the lenses of Others.

Our approach to unpacking Others begins with the data derived from the study. This is methodologically aligned with our analysis which is focused on drawing themes and issues from continuing iterative (re)reading of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), which demonstrates a sharper understanding of Others as espoused by our teacher participants, consistent with the representations of Others as found in the literature above. It must be highlighted that the main argument of the paper revolves around not who Others are but around how teachers' deeper and critical understanding of Others is mediated by state-driven ideologies. How do teachers negotiate contending views and ideologies about marginalized voices in children's literature, especially in conditions of unfreedom?

### ***Why We Need Diverse Books***

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has approved a resolution on the need for diverse children's and young adult books (Thomas, 2016) with the statement that: "Stories matter. Lived experiences across human cultures including realities about appearance, behaviour, economic circumstance, gender, national origin, social class, spiritual belief, weight, life, and thought matter." (NCTE, 2015, para. 1). Although excellent work has been produced to address this problem, the quintessential character of books for children in general remains unchanged: it is "overwhelmingly White. It is

also a world that is predominantly upper middle class, heterosexual, nondisabled, English-speaking, and male” (Crisp et al., 2016, p. 29).

Over the years, teachers and librarians have published recommendations on curating diverse and anti-biased collection of books in the classroom (McNair, 2016; Quiroa, 2017; Reid, 2018) in the hopes of getting teachers to use more multicultural books in their classrooms. Yokota (2015) has also provided very clear guidelines for educators and authors to address important issues of authenticity in picturebook narratives. This is because *diverse* picturebooks – used interchangeably in this paper with multicultural picturebooks or MPB -- provide a unique invitation for reader identification.

It is unclear, however, whether this pedagogical approach even permeates the sensibilities of teachers coming from non-Western contexts, and whether the need for multicultural books is even considered relevant, given the differences in cultural demographics. Singapore, being a largely multicultural society, lends itself to closer examination especially since educational policies have explicitly articulated the importance of maintaining racial harmony for national survival (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007). In fact, Baofu (2012) conceived of multiculturalism in Singapore as a context where different cultures “combine like a salad, as opposed to the more traditional notion of a cultural melting pot” (p. 22). Over and above the traditional definition of multiculturalism as merely a reflection of or an adaptation to diverse cultures, it serves as “an effective public policy tool to enhance a nation’s competitiveness” (Ng & Metz, 2015, p. 253), specifically as it refers to notions of tolerance, attracting foreign talent, and doing global trade (Kuah et al., 2020).

Given Singapore’s unique history, in reference to the oft-cited communal riots in 1950s and 1960s, “multiculturalism” has been deployed to serve what Geertz (1973, p.

44) refers to as “control mechanisms” to govern the behaviour of its citizens.

Multiculturalism in the context of Singapore is configured neatly into four major groups: Chinese (comprising of 74.3% of the population), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9%), and those labelled specifically as Others (3.2%) who are citizens and permanent residents of the country but who do not fall under any of the preceding major ethnic categories (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2018). This is because the country’s “*heterogeneous nature of the population*” (Quah, 1996, p. 60, italics as original) is considered one of the most serious constraints on policy-making and public administration, thus necessitating careful management and engagement because of the sensitivity of the topic. Therefore, multiculturalism in Singapore, according to prominent Singaporean sociologist Chua (2003), has been deployed as an instrument of social control. What then do teachers think and how do they navigate the pedagogical possibilities of diverse picturebooks in their own classrooms given the sensitive and contested nature of multiculturalism in the country itself? To answer this question is to unpack Others in pedagogy and discourse even after they have been sensitized into the ethical and political necessity of inclusive education, for example through the use of “diverse” picturebooks.

### ***Language, reading, and literature in Singapore schools***

The teaching of reading and literature in Singapore schools has always been a contentious endeavour, given the colonial trappings of most of the texts used even in the decades following the country’s independence in 1965, and given the multicultural and multiracial ecology of Singapore classrooms and society. It is in this light that the use of Singaporean texts historically has not been universally received not only because of questions about their universal quality, but also for their potential to open up sensitive and controversial issues in class. However, the political economy of reading, and of

literature in particular, in Singapore is inextricably imbricated in the country's zealous drive towards global competitiveness, thus leading to more direct state intervention in curriculum development to align education essentially with profitability and economic productivity (Poon, 2010). There are two key consequences.

First, the notion of literature "as marginal and irrelevant to life in Singapore" (Poon, 2010, p. 32) has not only resulted in a steady decline both in the enrollment of students majoring in English Literature and in take up rate of students in 'O' levels, but also in the perpetuation of a "default mode" (Loh et al., 2013, p. 1) of classroom practices in the teaching of literature generated by an "examination-centred pedagogy based on mechanical line-by-line reading and paraphrasing of texts" (ibid.). In broader terms, reading pedagogies in Singapore continue to be highly "scripted and authoritative" (Kwek et al., 2007, p. 77), with teachers mindful of their role to play in providing their students with ready-made, singular interpretations of texts for success in high stakes examinations.

Second, the language of reading and literature taught in schools is primarily English. In fact, since 1987 English has served as the primary language of instruction in all levels of education, thus making education in Singapore essentially English-medium. The use of the three mother tongues in school – Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil – occurs in mother tongue classes, but their use is mainly confined to specific subjects while English remains the undisputed language in all other subjects (Tupas, 2015).

### ***Shifting Educational Landscape Calls for Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Teaching***

The growing diversity in Singapore classrooms is evident in socio-economic status, religion, ability levels, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students in a regular classroom setting (Khum, 2013). Thus, one of the ongoing challenges in schools is to

ensure that each student, regardless of their ethnocultural origins, has an equal opportunity for social and economic mobility (Chong & Cheah, 2010, p. 9).

Gopalakrishnan (2011) states how diverse books play a crucial role in ensuring that this kind of deeper learning is facilitated in schools as they provide validation of children's feelings and experiences, provides scaffolding to develop empathy and tolerance, and gives opportunities for equal voice and representation. Diverse picturebooks, in particular, have been found to be one of the effective ways through which tenets of multicultural education can be fostered in the schools' curricula (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013) as they help teachers deal with cultural stereotyping, identify groups that may not be represented in picturebooks, and examine from a social justice perspective whose voices are silenced and who benefits from the reading of multicultural stories (Robinson, 2013).

The challenge with the use of diverse picturebooks among teachers is that it takes on instructional practices which encourage students to: "disrupt a common situation or understanding," "examine multiple viewpoints," "focus on sociopolitical issues," and "take action and promote social justice" (Norris et al., 2012, p. 59). Thus, the use of diverse picturebooks is potentially disturbing to many teachers as it does not only challenge their individual beliefs and philosophies, but it also mediates their understanding of educational and sociopolitical discourses and structures which shape their classroom practice. Thus, perceived importance of diverse picturebooks may not necessarily translate into any meaningful instructional practice (Frye et al., 2010). Consequently, it is important to clarify teachers' concerns regarding the usefulness of diverse picturebooks in their classrooms, and investigate their emotional and intellectual preparedness for such an endeavour.

## **Method**

### ***Context of the Study***

This paper aims to probe into the responses of 30 teacher participants who were enrolled in the higher-degree course entitled *Using Multicultural Children's Books to Promote Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Classroom*. This highly successful course elective (obtaining an excellent Teaching Index Score of 98.9 out of 100 based on student feedback) is open to all higher-degree students at an institute of higher learning in Singapore. The participants were involved in a larger funded research project which investigated the reading lives of Singapore teachers and the use of multicultural children's literature for social and emotional learning in the classroom. Several publications have emerged from this project, including teacher responses to critical discourses introduced in the classroom (Authors, 2016), strategies used by teachers to promote lifelong reading (Authors, 2018), and an early childhood diverse book list for social and emotional learning (Author, 2020). In this paper, the focus is on the responses of teachers concerning their views of Others in diverse picturebooks.

The course was conducted for three hours each session over a span of 13 weeks. Course objectives include the following: (1) gain knowledge of and provide access to diverse picturebooks that may be specifically linked to social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, responsible decision-making (2) acquire an understanding of various elements to look out for in outstanding diverse picturebooks, and (3) help teachers in developing strategies on how diverse picturebooks can be used in the classroom using a critical multicultural analytic lens (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) and Rosenblatt's (2005) transactional theory of reading to allow for a more affective engagement with the narratives. Throughout the semester, the teacher participants were exposed to more than

200 diverse picturebooks (see sample in Appendix A) that have been grouped together according to SEL themes and text-sets.

### ***Criteria for selection of picturebooks***

While multicultural children's literature has traditionally been defined as stories about people of colour (Sims Bishop, 2003), and the overarching goal was to build on teachers' knowledge and awareness of works by and about people of colour, it is how the books are used to represent varied cultural messages, multiple power relations, and to convey respect for human differences that is of significance (Botelho & Rudman 2009; Robinson, 2013). As such, there are picturebooks in the reading list that tackle themes that go beyond just diversity in race and ethnicity, but also include differences in religion, ability, gender, age, sexual orientation, body image, political beliefs and socioeconomic status (Lukens et al., 2013). Concerted efforts have likewise been made to include international picturebooks defined by Yokota and Teale (2017, p. 629) as "books originally created and published in a country outside one's own and then made available through a publisher in one's country (and, if necessary, translated from the original language into the local language)".

Award-winning titles from Singapore and Southeast Asia are likewise included in the reading list. Hence, the idea is to expand the notion of relevance (VanDerPloeg, 2012) to include varying realities from different countries in an effort to highlight diverse issues explored in picturebooks from around the world. The teachers were introduced to diverse picturebooks that are polysemic in nature (Serafini, 2009) as it allows spaces for multiple meanings, with gaps that can be filled by the reader (Ghosh, 2015).

### ***Participants***

Thirty in-service teachers participated in the study: 25 are female (83%), and five are male teachers (17%) who are between the 36-50 age groups. There were 29 teachers taking their Masters in Education in various specializations and one full time PhD student. 53% or 16 are primary school teachers, five early childhood educators (17%), four secondary school teachers (13%), two teachers in polytechnic colleges/institutes (7%), one Curriculum Planning Officer in the Ministry of Education (3%), and two respondents who failed to provide information (7%). These teachers have taught in local schools from four to 30 years (mean of 12 years of teaching). The composition of the respondents consists of the three major ethnic groups of Singapore: five Indians (17%), five Malays (17%), and 20 Chinese (66%).

Participants provided their written consent to participate in this study, as required by the university's internal review board (IRB), as they were duly informed that their participation was optional, that they would not be penalized at all for refusing to participate in the study, and they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time throughout the semester.

### ***Open Ended Learning Prompt***

During the 9<sup>th</sup> week of the course, a discussion on "Awareness of Others" was facilitated by the course instructor (this paper's first author). Before the class, the participants were asked to respond to a three-item open-ended learning prompt (see Appendix B for this). These questions deal with what the term Others means to the teachers, strategies they use in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging to children who may feel "out of place," "odd" or "different", and the type of training they feel they need to discuss such issues in the classroom.

### ***Focus Group Discussion***

During the 13th week of the course, three members of the research team (excluding the course instructor) facilitated three focus group discussions (FGD) among 28 out of the 30 students enrolled in the course (two students were absent during the FGD). The facilitators were not known to the students and had not been their instructors in other course modules. The participants were randomly assigned across the three groups. All FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed to allow researchers to study teachers' verbalization of thoughts, opinions and reflections. The average duration of the three FGD sessions is 44 minutes. See Appendix C for the FGD questions.

### ***Description of the Research Team***

The composition of the research team is interdisciplinary and multi-ethnic. The first author (a Filipina who lived in Singapore for eleven years, now based in the United Arab Emirates) is a clinical psychologist who developed the module in which the participants were enrolled. The second author is a sociolinguist (a Filipino who lived in Singapore for 20 years and now based in London) whose expertise is on multilingualism and education. He conducted FGD 3 (Insert Table 1). Other members of the research team include a teaching fellow with over 20 years of mainstream teaching experience in local primary schools and conducted FGD 2 (a Singaporean of Indian ethnicity). FGD 1 was conducted by an experienced research assistant (of Chinese ethnicity and nationality) with two Masters degrees in English language and applied linguistics.

### ***Data analysis***

The researchers used NVivo 10, a software used to help analyze data qualitatively. The research team reviewed each other's findings for similarities and differences in a rigorous peer debriefing process, until an agreement across the research team members

was firmly grounded in a continual iterative analysis of the data, which took several rounds of re-reading of the original FGD transcripts and responses to the open-ended learning prompts. The themes were allowed to emerge from the data organically rather than pre-figured as part of Glaser's emergent theory approach where coding themes are generated while reading and re-reading the data (Creswell, 2008).

In the first stage of analysis, the FGD transcripts and responses to the open-ended learning prompt were reviewed by the research team for accuracy. The second stage of analysis involved openly coding the transcripts for key words or phrases that represented the most elemental unit of meaning such as a thought, feeling or action (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this case, conceptions of Others in society and classroom, varied definitions of multiculturalism, evolving understanding of multicultural picturebooks, and classroom strategies used to promote a sense of belonging - are recurrent in the transcripts.

In the third analytical stage, responses that fell across specific categories and themes across the two data sources (open-ended learning prompts and FGD transcripts) were grouped together under a category (Patton, 2002) as can be seen in the four themes below. It was also evident at this stage that there is *conflicted discourse* and *conflicted practice* in the articulated responses as participants grapple with a more nuanced understanding of diversity in children's books. In the fourth analytical stage, researchers reviewed the appropriateness of both the general categories and themes, and the statements and quotes under each of these thematic groupings.

## **Results and Analysis**

There are four major themes evident across the FGD transcripts and the open-ended learning prompt: (1) teachers' conception of Others in society and the classroom, (2) teachers' articulated discomfort with nature of multiculturalism, (3) strategies currently

used in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging, and (4) action plans as part of embracive practice.

### ***Teachers' conception of the Others in Society and the classroom***

The teacher participants in the study conceive of Others in four ways: (a) Others by virtue of experience with some form of marginalization (e.g., social and economic status or class, cultural, linguistic, religious, and family background); (b) Others by virtue of ability; (c) Others by virtue of birth, race, nationality, and country of origin, and (d) Others by virtue of sexual orientation.

The first category of *Others* is articulated by 24 teachers (out of 30) and it refers to those who live in conditions of marginalization by virtue of their affiliation with a certain social class or cultural background. As noted by one teacher: *'In a school in an affluent neighbourhood, the Others could refer to those who live in slums or hail from the lower socio-economic strata of society.'*

Other teachers also mentioned differences in language and family background, such as this statement from one of them: Others are *"pupils from single parent family or even broken family, people who can't speak our language or have different cultural background."* There were also teachers who specifically mentioned the sense of disenfranchisement and being voiceless in society. According to one teacher: *"it means the marginalized, those who are likely not to be noticed by the majority, the silent, or even the oppressed."*

This view of *Others* as those experiencing some form of marginalization was likewise reflected in the FGD transcripts. This view has evolved after a more reflective understanding of what diverse picturebooks signify. The teachers across all three FGDs noted that they initially had *"a very shallow understanding"* of diverse picturebooks having *"to do with people of other cultures"* predicated upon their conceptions of

multiculturalism as constituting of “*the four races,*” as defined by the state, and that diverse picturebooks refer to “*festival, nationalities, and different cultural groups.*” This kind of thinking is not surprising as the teachers have simply articulated the official national narrative of what constitutes multiculturalism in Singapore or what is referred to as the 3Fs (Food, Fashion, and Festival; Ho, 2012), a view that demonstrates a largely touristic understanding of people from around the world (Styles, 2013). In fact, this “foods and festivals” approach to multicultural education (Castro et al., 2012, p. 98; see also Meyer & Rhoades, 2006) has been found to celebrate culture only at a surface level. Banks (2015), one of the pioneers in culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasized a total school reform that not only entails a cursory study of ethnic cultures and experiences (similar to the 3Fs) but one that makes a deliberate effort to enforce institutional changes to ensure a transformative and social action approach in multicultural education (see also Gay, 2018).

A second category of *Others* as articulated by 21 teachers refer to children with special needs or varying abilities in the classroom. According to one teacher, *Others* are “*those who have special needs, example those who are visually impaired, physically challenged, those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); the others could also be a term for gifted children.*”

A third category articulated by 14 teachers conscript *Others* with a “non-native” characterization by virtue of their being not originally from Singapore. Thus, they are “*international students*”, “*non-Singaporeans*”, and “*people who are not local, people who behave differently from the four main races in Singapore, people whose thinking/dress sense/habits are different from the majority.*” This is captured fully by one teacher who claimed that:

It refers to non-Singaporeans to me. I am a native of this small island. Anyone who comes here in search of a better life is Others to me. Even if the Others have stayed here long enough to be considered a citizen, I still feel they are Others, just like our forefathers who migrated here. But, anyone not born and bred here is Others.

This third view of Otherness is a patently evocative one because it does not only draw a boundary between *us* and *them* as what predictably happens to any characterization of *otherness*, but more importantly it imputes non-citizenship an inherent, “immutable” (Haslam et al., 2000, p. 125) and “historically invariant” (p. 114) quality, thus making it impossible for Others to extricate themselves from conditions of otherness. By implication, those who espouse this view also assign for themselves an identity rooted in an exclusive right to claim ownership over a nation and all its sociocultural, political and socioeconomic privileges (see Smedly & Smedly, 2005).

Seven teachers have extended the discourse of marginalization further in the open-ended learning prompt by mentioning something that is considered to be largely taboo in the Singapore classroom. These teachers referred to Others as “*those who have lifestyle and feelings that is not the norm, e.g. sexual orientation.*” Another teacher, after mentioning that Others could also refer to LGBT, stated in parentheses that “*(not sure if there are children from LGBTs families in our Singapore school).*” This observation is interesting as it may also point towards a more subtle and insidious conceptual underpinning of “it is not talked about, then it does not exist” type of thinking, which leads other teacher educators to note that there are “missing mirrors, missing windows” in the discussion of children’s literature in connection to LGBT topics (Smolkin & Young 2011, p. 217; see also Clark & Blackburn, 2009).

We see here how the teachers have opened up to an understanding of diversity beyond the state-dictated formulation of multiculturalism which is an ideological construct to start with (Chua, 2013), thus reconstituting Others through the lens of social

marginalization along the overlapping lines of gender and sexual orientation, ability, social class, ethnicity and family history. However, such a more sophisticated construction of Others is also complicated by the belief that otherness is also being non-native to Singapore, thus contributing to the naturalizing discourse of Singaporean identity and, in the process, participating in the further marginalization of non-native Singaporeans.

***Conflicted Discourse: Teachers' articulated discomfort with nature of multiculturalism***

Teachers' general sensitivity to experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups and the represented/underrepresented voices (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) indicates a growing understanding of the need to unpack the underlying assumptions of what constitutes diverse picturebooks. However, some of the teachers also expressed concerns about using the term "multicultural" with colleagues in their respective schools. As noted by one teacher from FGD 3:

I would rather just say that these are books that introduce SEL (socio-emotional learning). You know, to add on a label of multicultural, I find it's more daunting, and makes the task more difficult. That's my personal opinion.

Teachers from FGD 1 also mentioned the difficulty of introducing same gender families through MPB. And so while on the one hand, they acknowledge the importance of using diverse picturebooks, they articulated a caveat:

... not for every theme, because some of the themes are quite controversial. And I think we need to be mindful of the implication of it also. For kindergarten, primary 1, primary 2, I'll not use where they have same gender families. Two mothers, two fathers. I don't think so. That's something I don't want to talk about. But for Primary 6, yah, it's possible. Expose them and let them think about it gradually. Not to say that it's fine or ok but ask them to think about the issues.

This type of response is likewise evident in the teachers' articulations in the open-ended learning prompt which point towards a preservation of the status quo and what is regarded to be the predominant societal values and norms. According to one teacher:

I think it is important to consider the dominant values of the majority or the values which the organisation stands for. Professionally, we have to reflect the values of the organisations which employ us... While it is not that we cannot question these shared values but that we should do it professionally and delicately and to agree with other staff members on the approach to the questioning of those shared values.

The fact that a teacher's strong personal beliefs could potentially inform his or her own practice can be seen quite clearly in another teacher's response:

As for non-traditional homes, the challenges of single-parent families are a reality and through the medium of picture books, the perspective of the parent and the child can be foregrounded. However, I do not advocate the portrayal of same-gender parents as these "families" are not-natural families rather than non-traditional. And these aren't values which should be encouraged in society, particularly not to children.

Another teacher also acknowledged that her own biases heighten her apprehensions, alongside the potential untoward response from parents if and when these topics are discussed in the classroom.

I would be more apprehensive to talk about LGBT issues as an educator. I may have my own personal biases which I need to address first and also I do not have enough background knowledge of such topics to discuss them in class. More importantly, for primary school children, I do not think that they are matured enough to handle such topics and parental consent is another issue. Parents might not be pleased when such 'taboo' topics are discussed in schools.

Socioemotional Learning (SEL) pedagogy, which is subsumed under Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) in Singapore, is meant to make students become better global citizens (Singapore MOE, 2005) through inclusivity and respect for diversity. However, the quotes above collectively attempt to provide a “safer” discourse for SEL by divorcing it from an understanding of multiculturalism as representing “voices of the marginalized and the silenced”. It is this critical engagement with multiculturalism or diversity which the teachers find potentially problematic and polemical because such engagement is uncharted territory in a country where “climates of conservatism and censorship,” most especially in the classrooms (Ho, 2012, p. 237), still predominate. Hence, there is legitimate concern and anxiety of stepping outside of what is known as “Out of Bounds markers” (OB markers) in Singapore (Baildon & Sim 2009, p. 415). We see here how the teachers by and large espouse a conflicted discourse of inclusivity on Others where socially marginalized or oppressed sectors are acknowledged but also unwelcome amidst ideological and political conditions which dictate classroom practice.

***Conflicted Practice: Strategies currently used in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging***

Regardless of the teachers’ discomfort about some of the issues surrounding multiculturalism and the use of diverse picturebooks, the teachers are overwhelmingly cognizant of specific strategies that they can use in the classroom to promote a sense of inclusion. In the open-ended learning prompt, 25 out of 30 teachers noted how important it is to create a “culture of care” and inclusivity by actively involving students either through games, class activities including those that emphasize perspective taking, group sharing, altering the physical structure of the classroom environment to facilitate

collaborative learning strategies, and the reading of stories. One teacher noted the power of narratives:

Reading books on characters who are facing similar experiences and get the class to discuss about the stories by giving solutions and alternatives. This way, the class will be more receptive and are willing to open up and accept people who are 'different' in the classroom.

This sharp awareness and technical proficiency of specific tasks that teachers can do in the classroom is also highlighted in this teacher's response:

(a) Use Cooperative Learning strategies– promotes learning, fosters respect and friendships among diverse group of students. If this is done well and often, nobody will feel left out. (b) CCE lessons – promote R3ICH values (respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care, harmony). In my school, all form teachers are CCE teachers, so it is easier to talk about the values outside of CCE lessons too. (c) Use of Circle Time –teachers can use this time to interact with students and discuss issues related to the class (d) Use of Differentiated Instruction – the use of flexible grouping (performance-based group, same interest group, pair work).

Evidently, the teachers are hardly at a loss when it comes to opportunity, means, resources, and sound pedagogical tools to promote inclusive practices in the classroom.

As one teacher noted: *“The key to this is a culture of dialogue and a culture of care.”*

Six teachers also highlighted that it is important to know the individual student's profile and the importance of providing spaces for *“individual talk time with the teacher.”*

Another teacher mentioned that this is something that she is particularly mindful of:

As a teacher, I often look out for such kids in my class. I would show empathy to such kind of children and seek to understand them by finding more about them and the background. I would create opportunities to interact with them because then, I can gain their confidence in me and let them know my sincerity.

Reflecting on these “embrasive” (Chmela-Jones, 2017, p. S1049; Mukwambo et al., 2018, p. 2; Wade Bussey, 2007, p. 9) attitudes and articulated practices which allow for “room for the acceptance of difference” (Wade Bussey, 2007, p. 9) but which are heavily stacked against the teachers’ conflicted discourse on Others and multiculturalism in general, we see a kind of *discursive compartmentalization* which we define elsewhere as the process by which “teachers deploy parallel discourses which do not quite yet intersect or collide in order to transform each other” (Authors, 2016, p. 46). One “is an openly critical intellectual engagement with important social issues through the subject of multicultural children’s literature, and the other is a patently State-disciplined discourse that follows the dominant script of acquiescence to surface-level and superficial treatment of multiculturalism.” (p. 46). In other words, the teachers display a high level of technical proficiency in terms of articulating a wide range of strategies and practices for inclusive pedagogy, but they continue to be framed by dominant or mainstream conceptions of *Otherness* where some forms of diversity are privileged over others.

### ***Action Plans as Embrasive Practice***

As a result of the course module, most teachers also articulated feeling a sense of energy that compelled them to do something either (i.) professionally: within their capacity as teachers or (ii.) personally: as parents of young children and as community members.

*Action plan: professional lives*

Some of the teachers shared how they plan to use some of the multicultural picturebooks in their classroom, as can be seen in this detailed sharing from a Teacher in FGD 1:

After attending this course, I've already planned to use the multicultural books in my Character and Citizenship Education lessons. So, I'm going to complement the curriculum with all these multicultural books. I've spoken to my Head of Department about using all these multicultural books to teach values and SEL skills during the *Living Well* lessons. And I'm going to go ahead with it, first: experiment, record it, and share it with the other teachers, and if they are also interested, get them to do it as well.

A few teachers also mentioned setting up book clubs and making changes in their school libraries, making books more accessible to students, and curating their present book collection and filling in the gaps.

*Action plan: personal lives*

Not only are the teachers inspired in terms of what they can do in the classroom, they are also excited about the possibilities of writing their own stories. As parents, they are eager to expand their personal libraries and share new titles with their children. A few mentioned how some of the book titles engendered conversations and inspired them to bring their own children regularly to the library, not so much to improve their literacy and numeracy, but rather to simply enjoy the books. One teacher even talked about volunteering in the National Library to facilitate book reading every week:

The turning point is that this session changed me, so I can change my students, I can change my own child. I feel that it's really a great idea to attend this course. (Teacher from FGD 3)

Imagine every parent has three years old or two years old child, they all attend this course, I think all the children, this batch of children they can be changed a lot.

(Teacher from FGD 3)

### **Conclusion: From embracive to transformative pedagogy?**

Corley (2011, p. 2) defines transformative learning as the way in which “individuals think about themselves and their world, and it involves a shift of consciousness.” It also includes a realization of the relevance of their learning experiences, a built-in time for learner’s reflection and an in-depth analysis of their learning and progress. Appova and Arbaugh (2018) further point out that transformative learning is embedded in the concept of andragogy as a theory of adult learning which also includes the principle of self-directed learning.

However, given the conflicted nature of teachers’ discourse and practice in relation to notions of multiculturalism and diversity, it remains to be seen whether transformative pedagogy -- described above as constitutive of a kind of shift of consciousness -- is close to being practiced by the teachers themselves. Nevertheless, what these concrete and detailed plans demonstrate is the teachers’ embracive approach to negotiating their own conflicted discourse and practice as they articulated their desire to move into doing some kind of change or social action within their own sphere of influence. This intention to effect change is one of the important goals of the multicultural education movement, providing spaces for sustained conversations that would help in translating these reflections into practice (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Colby and Lyon (2004) pointed out that one of the real challenges in teacher education is to heighten the awareness among teachers regarding the powerful role that diverse picturebooks can play in the lives of children since it will have very clear implications when it comes to educational practice: “The impact of a thoughtful teacher can be

profound. As teachers become more aware of their own beliefs, attitudes and practices relating to diversity in the classroom, the children they teach will benefit” (p. 28). This is the reason why, as argued by Appova and Arbaugh recently (2018), there is a need to examine teachers’ conceptions, cognition, and beliefs as these influence and impact on classroom practices and pedagogy. Future studies may also do well to examine further if there are existing differences in responses across different teaching levels – which would have been more instructive with a larger number of participants.

The default understanding of diversity in children’s literature is rooted upon surfacing narratives of people of colour (see Sims Bishop above) as contrasted with prevailing, mainstream stories that traditionally do not provide adequate representation (if at all) of non-White characters. In the Singapore context, an examination of the top ten best-selling children’s books in 2020 reveal authors coming from the United States - with Dav Pilkey ranked as #1, followed by Jeff Kinney, and Geronimo Stilton (“Bestsellers” in Straits Times, 2020). This suggests that children’s books coming from outside of the country sell more than locally-published ones. However, it can be argued that there are other ways of accessing titles published in Singapore and neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, especially with Singapore’s heavy investment in their public libraries that feature both local and international titles (Miller, 2019; for greater discussion on the importance of access to books, see Krashen, 2013). Yet, this paper also challenges the assumption of *diversity* as understood only from the lens of Whiteness. It attempts to consider a conception of *diversity* that casts the net wider to include translated or international titles from various parts of the world, in addition to locally-published titles promoting a sense of identification from within one’s cultural context, and a potential concept of *diversity* or *otherness* if perceived from a different sociocultural context.

Nevertheless, what this paper has shown is that unpacking teachers' articulation of what constitutes Others for them in a safe, non-threatening higher degree classroom environment, also brings to light unwitting prejudices or biases that may largely be unrecognized for what they are. In fact, one teacher mentioned this as well in his response: "*people generally feel secure in groups, and to preserve their sense of security there is a tendency to have an 'us versus them' outlook, a sectarian outlook.*" It also behooves teacher educators to reflect on their own roles and responsibilities in light of in-service teachers' casual *us* versus *them* sensibility and how this could potentially impact interactions in a classroom filled with children not just coming from Singapore but from varied countries of varying ethnicities. It is clear from the teachers' responses that the course has helped unsettle deep-seated beliefs and stereotypical expectations of what multiculturalism and diverse picturebooks are, as well as opened up spaces for critical engagement with a wide array of issues of social marginalization and equity. A critical literacy approach to understanding diverse picturebooks also acknowledges how words serve to position the reader in terms of who are included or excluded in the narrative (Janks, 2013), delve into the power dynamics inherent in the narratives, and serve to confront educators about attempts made (if any) to practice inclusivity in the classroom.

However, change does not happen overnight, thus it remains to be seen whether changes in thinking and discourses do indeed translate to transformative practices in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it must be noted that in the scholarly literature (Chong & Cheah 2010; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013), attitudinal and discursive change among teachers is already suggestive of potentially effective and embrative teaching in their own classrooms.

Thus, such conflicted discourse and practice as articulated by the teachers should be seen as a positive challenge for teacher education to build the capacity of teachers to use diverse picturebooks for diverse children in the classroom. Conflictedness, in the first place, is not an aberration in transformative thinking and learning as it seen as a product of reflection. Teachers espouse “lived ideologies” (Shkedi & Horenczyk, 1995, p. 108) which “need not be internally consistent”. In conditions where OB (Out of Bound) markers continue to permeate, teachers’ embracive attitudes and articulated practices provide the fertile ground as evidenced in existing frameworks and initiatives (e.g., Character and Citizenship Education, SEL framework, R3ICH values), from which to mount a more transformative pedagogy where teachers can begin to disentangle the conflicted nature of their discourse and practice concerning Others, the beginning of an unsettling but necessary shift in consciousness.

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