

THE MINORITY IN ART AND MUSIC EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON CONNECTIVITY AND DIS-CONNECTIVITY OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM ON MULTICULTURALISM IN SINGAPORE'S SCHOOLS

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Introduction

With the changing times, Singapore's education system has moved towards 21st century competencies, in which education in schools goes beyond knowledge to include values and dispositions (Barber & Mourshed, 2009; Lee, Hung, & Teh, 2014; Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014a). The development of 21st century competencies encourages culturalism, naming "civic literacy, global awareness and cross-cultural skills" as one of the three competencies. There are many ways to implement these competencies, and the ways in which they are carried out may differ from one school to another. However, because schools are working with the same set framework, every school in Singapore bases its methods on the same grounds.

The General Music Programme Syllabus for primary and secondary levels is updated periodically to meet the framework of the nation's education system. The music syllabus was updated in 2014 and implemented in 2015 to support the development of 21st century competences. The music syllabus aims to "contribute to the future development and preservation of Singapore's cultural heritage" and to "develop awareness and appreciation of music in local and global cultures" (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014b). At the same time and since it was implemented in 2009, the Art Syllabus continues to create cultural awareness through the appreciation of art.

The amount of time allocated for subjects is recommended by the Ministry, but school leaders have the authority to decide the actual amount of time that students receive for the subjects, weighing academic and aesthetic needs. At primary level, music lessons are conducted weekly for 30 minutes to one hour. Similarly, at primary school and lower secondary levels, students receive a one-hour art lesson each week. The amount of time allocated to both subjects is almost identical, except for the Primary 5 and 6 level. The reason why more time is allocated to visual art than to music is never explained at management or teacher level. The only explanation offered by the school leader is that it is a guideline given by MOE. One would presume that because more materials are involved in visual art lessons, more time is needed than in music lessons to set up and put away the materials.

Perspectives as Methodology

Many studies have been done on the music and art curriculums and multi-ethnicities in the national curriculum of Singapore (e.g. Cain, 2010, 2015; Cheng, 1970; Chong, 1992; Hickman, 1990; Hilarian & Howard, 1997; Kong, 2014; Leong, 1997). Of these, Cain's (2015) study is the latest and most relevant, as she examines, through semi-structured interviews, the training that teachers received at teacher's college in terms of multicultural music and the application of their knowledge in the field. However, what I am offering in this article is an auto-ethnographical view in contexts of professional practice, interrogating and deconstructing my own discourse while thinking reflexively and critically reflecting on and questioning my place in the research as I examine the concepts of both self and culture (Alcoff, 1991; Denshire, 2014). My discussion is based on 15 years of experience as a fulltime educator in Singapore. I strive to present a holistic view of the multiculturalism of aesthetics education in Singapore as an insider and an outsider and as a consumer and a vendor.

I consider myself an "insider," having taught at both primary and secondary schools during these times in Singapore. As a NIE-trained music teacher,¹ I have supported the Ministry's initiatives in one way or another, in the role of a teacher and as key personnel. Progressively, education became a business to me when I was a "vendor" for a period of time. I provided services to schools as an external educator: staged musicals and school productions, conducted speech and drama modules, conducted choirs, and wrote the art and music lesson plans for the clients, most of whom are private or state schools. During those times, my clients included not only primary and secondary schools but also pre-schools, teachers, and trainers in education. As a "consumer," I represent other parents who are like me, a parent of two children who have a culturally diverse background and attend local schools. I agree with Nettle when he states that "the best approach is to reconcile one's self to being an outsider, providing a limited if unique view" (2005, p. 160). So, my task today as an "outsider" is not only to present my case study, but I am also here to seek a conclusion, to bring about an agreement with myself for what Winston Churchill called the blood, toil, tears, and sweat that I have put into this career for the last 20 years,² as I reflect on the days when I was an educator in both primary and secondary schools.

In this paper, I will give a personal account that draws upon my experiences as an educator for the purpose of extending sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21) of how connected or disconnected the national curriculum is on multiculturalism, concentrating on the art and music curriculums and the various ways in which schools planned their curriculum to promote multiculturalism. I will also explore if this all-inclusive curriculum has left anyone behind in its efforts to meet 21st century competencies.

1 NIE: National Institute of Education, a state-owned national teacher training institution where those who aspire to be public school teachers are enrolled and trained.

2 "Blood" from vomiting blood (metaphorically speaking) out of frustration when the children didn't understand what was being taught after repeated explanations. "Toil" from the late hours marking children's work and preparing lessons. "Tears" which just come so naturally at every student graduation. "Sweat" simply from the hot weather of Singapore.

On the Music and Art Syllabi

Both the General Music Programme Syllabus and the Art Syllabus are planned for children from Primary 1 to Secondary 2 and span four key stages across the levels. Each stage comprises two levels; for example, stage one comprises Primary 1 and 2, and so on. In comparing the two syllabi, the General Music Programme has more learning objectives to meet than the Art Syllabus, and it is more specific when outlining the learning objectives. It also focuses more clearly on cultural diversity; hence, it gives more guidance to teachers who adapt it to their schools’ needs.

Table 1. The five overarching learning objectives for all four learning stages of the music syllabus. Source: Ministry of Education Singapore (2014b).

Stage	Level	Learning objectives
Stage 4	Secondary 1-2	1) Perform music in both instrumental and vocal settings, individually and in groups 2) Create music in both instrumental and vocal settings, individually and in groups 3) Listen and respond to music 4) Appreciate music in local and global cultures 5) Understand musical elements and concepts
Stage 3	Primary 5-6	
Stage 2	Primary 3-4	
Stage 1	Primary 1-2	

In the music syllabus, five overarching learning objectives are prescribed to achieve the learning outcomes through active musical experiences, such as music creation, performance, and listening and responding to music. The learning objective that is linked to the opportunity to learn multicultural music is learning objective 4: Appreciate music in local and global cultures. It is further explained that by exposing children to both local and global cultures from a young age, they will gain insights into other cultures. Students learn to appreciate and recognise music from global cultures, particularly folk songs and children’s songs and instruments selected from the suggested list of countries; these countries include Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, China, India, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America. By the time students reach Secondary 1-2, they are expected to discuss in greater detail, compared to the primary levels, their responses towards music from different genres and cultures.

In contrast to the music syllabus, the art syllabus does not have a specific learning objective for experiencing global cultures through art. Instead, it says that students may be brought into contact with multicultural art through “understand[ing] and valu[ing] art from a variety of cultures and context” and “heighten[ing] students’ aesthetics and cultural awareness” through art appreciation via the three main domains: seeing, expressing, and appreciating. It is further explained that “the art framework ensures

students are provided with the opportunities to observe their environment, generate ideas and create”; “environment” here may refer to the surroundings and the social and cultural forces that shaped the art. Although there is a similar diagrammatic structure for the art syllabus, there is no section focusing on global perspective. Instead, global art is infused into the syllabus in other ways. From Primary 1 through 6, it is recommended that teachers plan with themes in mind to connect students’ learning with their experiences in the wider world, meaning the world outside their country. And at Secondary 1 and 2, teachers are to guide students to “value local art as part of Singapore’s heritage.”

Both syllabi make allowances for teachers’ creativity and ease in adapting it to their students’ and schools’ needs, especially in the art syllabus, in which the learning objectives are loosely defined. However, because teachers are given space to apply the syllabus based on their own discretion, they may miss out on the essence of the subject. I agree with Lum and Dairianathan (2014, p. 291) that most music graduates are trained in Euro-American art music traditions, whether it is in applied areas of specialisation or academic studies. So how open are they towards music of other traditions, and, after being supplied with the necessary knowledge through the teacher training programme, how equipped are they to carry out the requirements of the syllabus? Moreover, with a syllabus that is not specific and allows space for teachers to select which countries’ music they will teach, would it not mean that different teachers would teach different content, and the delivery of the subject and the depth of their lessons would also be different?

The syllabus is purposely planned with space for teachers to take ownership of their lessons and to plan work-plans according to the needs of their students. The syllabus trusts each teacher to tap into the training that he or she has received and to exercise her or his viewpoint and knowledge in carrying out the syllabus. How much of and to what degree the “global” aspect of the syllabus is being carried out depends on the teacher’s knowledge of and passion for the art or music of the world. In other words, the teacher has the autonomy to highlight the art or music and culture of any country she chooses. I recall that, as head of the subject, when it was left to my team of specialised art and music teachers to decide the work-plan, they tended to select topics that allowed them to teach only the areas that they were comfortable with and conveniently to ignore or teach minimally other topics with which they were not familiar. This observation is supported by Cain’s (2015) research on the multiculturalism of the music programme in Singapore. She found that, in recent years, the training of specialised music teachers may have stepped up, but teachers’ perceptions that Asian music is enough to cover the “global” aspects of the music syllabus handicap true multiculturalism in music (*ibid*, 471). So to what degree are the art and music syllabi connected to multiculturalism?

My Children as “Others”

Singapore’s population is made up largely of a culturally diverse Asian population, with the official racial categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). In the context of Singapore, the term “race” is loosely used to refer to the four main categories of ethnicities mentioned above, while Other is a collective term for any other ethnicities that do not fall into the CMI categories, with no scientific reference (Hill & Lian, 1995,

p. 95). Out of a total population of 5.54 million in 2015, the ethnic composition is as follows: 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malay, 9.1% Indian, and 3.3% Others (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015). Correspondence with Ms. Pearl Lim, Department of Statistics, Singapore (personal communication, October 21, 2015), has clarified that the “Others” include Arab, Caucasian, Eurasian, Filipino, Japanese, Nepalese, and the children of parents who are of different races.³ The identity of the people of Singapore is a complex one, because firstly, Singapore has a policy of multiracialism as opposed to multiculturalism (Wong, 2000). Secondly, the categorising of the nation into three main groups is solely for political reasons. It was designed to reduce or eliminate ethnic conflict, manage differences, and foster social cohesion amongst the different races (Buras & Motter, 2006; Chua, 2003; Keong, 2013; Pereira, 2006). At the same time, it covers up the diverse differences in each category.

Personally, I am very interested in this topic because my children are of mixed-ethnicities: the offspring of a Norwegian father and a locally born and bred Singaporean-Chinese mother, whose nationality is Singaporean and ethnicity is Chinese. One can widely categorise my children as Eurasians, which may be defined as mixed European and Asian descent, moving away from the meaning of Eurasian in the colonial era (Pereira, 2006; Rocha, 2011). In Singapore, before 2011, my children would have been categorised as “Caucasians,” a label that follows their father’s cultural identity but which loses their Chinese-ness. In 2011, double-barrelled identity was introduced to answer “the need for flexibility due to the increasing diversity of Singapore’s demographics, with the inflow of immigrants and more locals marrying foreigners” (Tay, 2010). My children can now choose to include both races of their parents on their National Registration Identity Cards thus allowing them to recognise their roots. However, in the Singapore Consensus survey, they would still be considered as “Others.” In addition, “Others” is made up of Eurasians (1%) and other races that do not fall into the category of Chinese, Malay, or Indian; in other words, as Lian puts it, “Others” is “open-ended” (2016, p. 12). According to the Census of Population in 2010, the last year in which a breakdown was provided of the resident population of “Others” by ethnic group, “Others” include Filipino, Caucasian, Eurasian, Arab, Thai, Japanese, and further others, smaller groups that haven’t been mentioned before. By categorising them with the other minority groups, the diverse differences in race are ignored (Loomba, 2005; Rocha, 2014). My children contribute to this category, which is the minority of minorities. What is more, as they are part of a category that represents 3.3% of the total population of the country, is there any chance that my children would learn about their race in school, especially during art and music lessons? Would there be any lessons that would teach them about their Norwegian-ness?

3 Double-barrelled race came into effect on January 1, 2011. Children of parents who are of different races may record their race to include that of their father and mother. For example, if the father is German and the mother is Chinese, the race of the child may be recorded as German, Chinese, German-Chinese or Chinese-German. The race recorded is relevant when the child is assigned her/his mother-tongue language subject in school and when purchasing public housing according to the ethnic integration policy (Immigration and Checkpoint Authority Singapore, 2010).

Multiculturalism in Schools

Schools in Singapore take multiculturalism seriously. There are many ways in which multiculturalism is taught, and one of the common methods is by infusing multiculturalism into the various subjects via national education. National Education messages, which include inculcating racial and religious harmony, permeate most subjects. For example, in a Secondary 1 English Language lesson, students could write an informal letter to a friend in New Zealand in celebration of International Friendship day. Besides learning the format of an informal letter, students could write on the purpose of and reasons for celebrating international friendship day, thus recognising the importance of making friends across cultures. The most direct method of teaching multiculturalism is in Social Studies lessons. The curriculum does not focus only on the Singaporean context, but it promotes an international approach. By doing so, students learn from the mistakes of others while realising the importance of social cohesiveness.

At both primary and secondary levels, it is compulsory for pupils to receive social studies lessons. In the first few years of schooling, the curriculum concentrates on the history of Singapore, and as the years progress, the curriculum becomes more globally oriented, looking at the problems faced by other countries. Through case studies of conflict in other countries, the curriculum is designed to teach citizenship with the aim of promoting strong national identity, multicultural understanding, and global perspectives (Ho, 2009, p. 289; Sim, 2011, p. 743). Part of national education is the commemoration of the racial riots that took place in 1964. Racial Harmony Day is celebrated annually on July 21. Schools reflect on and celebrate Singapore's success as a racially harmonious nation and society built on a rich diversity of cultures and heritage. On this day, children are encouraged to wear their traditional costumes to school; for example, the Chinese *Cheongsam*,⁴ Malay *Baju kurung*,⁵ Indian *sari*,⁶ and the Peranakan *kebaya*,⁷ which has been made popular by the Singapore Airlines' uniform. Also on this day, children learn through playing traditional games, such as *carrom*,⁸ *chapteh*,⁹ and chess; through doing traditional activities, like Chinese calligraphy, Chinese tea appreciation, and *ketupat*

4 *A cheongsam* is a one-piece tight-fitting dress for females, and it is also one of the national costumes of China.

5 *A baju kurung* is for both males and females. It is the national costume of Brunei and Malaysia.

6 *A sari* is a female costume, originating from the south. It consists of a long drape that goes round one's waist and over the shoulder.

7 *A kebaya* is the traditional, elegant, and high-fashion costume of the Peranakans: Chinese immigrants who married Malay partners.

8 *Carrom* is a "strike and pocket" table game in which players use their index finger to push a disc which then strikes a coloured disc into one of the pockets located at the four corners of the table.

9 *A chapteh* is a shuttlecock with a weight at the bottom. In a traditional game, players use their feet and balance to kick the *chapteh* and keep it in the air.

weaving;¹⁰ and sometimes even through serving traditional delicacies. Most of the activities and the traditional costumes that children wear to school are Chinese, Malay, and Indian, but sometimes they are Other.

Furthermore, the National Arts Council Singapore has a grant for Arts Education Programme in schools, which enables students to be actively involved in arts programmes conducted by external professionals. On the list of professionals whom the art council has screened are artists who perform art forms of various cultures. Examining the directory of artists and art forms they offer, I see many programmes that are of Chinese, Malay, and Indian heritage and Euro-American. There are few to no art forms of minorities. To illustrate, a search of the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme results in three Thai-related arts programmes: one dance performance, one music-related performance, and one music-related activity; in these, the Thai aspect is only a small component of each programme. Usually, the school invites external artists to showcase their art form during the weekly assembly period, which is an hour slot. During the years I was a school teacher, we invited a maximum of four groups per year to perform due to limited funds. Moreover, I was encouraged to choose artists who were able to support the school curriculum and local heritage. As a result, many times we chose groups who promoted Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Euro-American art forms. Additionally, depending on the funding available in schools, some students got to partake in aesthetic-cultural experiences overseas, which was way and above what the curriculum recommended. Once again, I would like to emphasise that these events are not required in the syllabus but privileges and opportunities that the aesthetics curriculum planned, aligning with the school's objectives.

The Degree of Connectivity in the National Music and Art Curriculum

Multiculturalism is embraced by all schools in Singapore, so that students will be equipped with 21st century competencies. Besides encompassing different cultures into subjects taught, special events and days are set aside to commemorate and celebrate the diversity of races in Singapore. The General Music Programme and Art Syllabi, for instance, are good examples of how multiculturalism is being infused in the curriculum. Despite a degree of particularisation in both the General Music Programme and Art syllabi, the objective to create local and global cultural awareness is definite. There is an expectation for students to learn to appreciate music and art not just of local heritage but also from international traditions. Even though the manner in which teachers implement the content may differ, with the guidance of the syllabi, they will no doubt achieve the learning objectives. Thus music and art lessons are well connected to multiculturalism, especially the Chinese, Malay, and Indian cultures.

10 *Ketupat* is a type of rice dumpling wrapped in a palm leaf pouch. The weaving of the palm leaf is a skill in itself as it involves technique to get it right.

While the arts of the Chinese, Malay, and Indian cultures may be internalised in music and art subjects, the arts of the minorities are not. Based on my observations and past experiences, I strongly argue that there is too much focus on the local cultures (CIM) and not enough focus on the arts of the minorities, the Others. Three main factors contribute to this disparity. Firstly, there is too much content in the syllabus to cover. Secondly, teachers play a big role in deciding the type of music and art they teach. Thirdly, due to the way in which people are categorised according to race in Singapore, the chance of students being exposed to the arts of their true identity is further lessened. These factors jeopardise the possibility of having true multiculturalism, in which no boundaries are set by either ethnicity or political orientation (Hassenger, 1992), in the national art and music curriculum.

With the primary school music curriculum, the work-plan of my particular school is developed on the recommended syllabus and the needs of the school and its students. It is such that, by the end of their six years of primary education, all students would have been exposed to Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Euro-American cultures. They played musical instruments such as the *guzheng*, *angklung*, *kompang*, recorder, and ukulele. It is no doubt a rich curriculum, but students are hardly taught any instruments of other ethnic groups, such as the Filipino's *bukto*,¹¹ Eurasian's *balalaika*,¹² Arab's *Oud*,¹³ or Thai's *khim*.¹⁴ There is simply too much content to be covered within the total number of hours that are allocated to the subject per year. As a result, the music of the main cultures is often the focal point of the subject, while the music of minority cultures is sacrificed.

Teachers play a big role in deciding what is to be taught in the classroom even though the syllabus is available to guide them. All teachers were exposed to world music during their training years at teachers' college, but because the majority of teachers have a music background that is Euro-American, they naturally and conveniently tend to teach Euro-American music because they are comfortable with it. In the music programme, when a choice is given and teachers can choose from a buffet of countries to teach, it is almost innate for them to choose those they are adequate in and have been exposed to most of the time, that is, the music of the majority. In other words, they leave out the music of the Others.

The music and art syllabi are well constructed, and training provided at NIE is comprehensive; both prepare teachers for their job. But, the onus is on the teachers. To design an all-inclusive curriculum for his/her pupils, a teacher can simply conduct a quick survey of the class. The content that he/she teaches does not have to cover all the ethnicities in the country, which would be impractical as the Singaporean population consists of many ethnic groups. However, I see it as part and parcel of a teacher's duty to understand the make-up of her class and adapt the curriculum to the needs of her

11 A *buktot* is a four-stringed instrument made from coconut shells.

12 A *balalaika* is a triangular bodied instrument with three strings that resembles a guitar.

13 An *oud* is a pear-shaped lute with 11 or 12 strings paired in five or six groups.

14 A *khim* is a simple form of dulcimer, very popular with school children.

students. In other words, teachers need to raise social and global awareness as 21st century competencies. Given the ethnic make-up of any given class in Singapore today, if the teacher covers the music of just the ethnicities of her pupils, then the classroom would be as wide as the world.

Let us not forget that the Singapore government categorises its people into four official groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others; and this categorisation masks the numerous differences within each group. In my years of schooling, I was never taught the music of the ethnicities in our school. In fact, we were discouraged to speak in our own dialects. I only heard folk songs in my dialect when my mother sang to me when I was young. When I ask her about them now, she can hardly remember them. I am sure we are brainwashed with today's national songs, which are played over and over again on the media whenever a racial commemoration day or national day is around the corner. Likewise, my children have a very slim chance of learning about their Norwegian heritage in Singapore. The likelihood of locally trained teachers being exposed to traditional Norwegian music is small; they are even less likely to teach my children their heritage. My children are disconnected from their roots; the school curriculum that has been planned for them has disengaged them from the many cultures of Singaporean society and has only concentrated on the generic races.

True Multiculturalism

The problem of representation of minorities within the minority is a difficult one, especially when politics is involved. The day Singapore declared independence in 1965, the constitution established equality for Chinese, Malay, and Indian citizens but suppressed the cultural rights of the minority groups. According to the Singapore Constitution Article 152, the Malays are acknowledged as the indigenous people of Singapore, yet recognising their "special position" conflicts with the constitution of meritocracy in Article 12. To infer, the government's responsibility is only to protect, safeguard, promote, and educate people to their political advantage. Therefore, true multiculturalism does not exist in Singapore: the voices of the "Others" will not be heard, probably because their true identity is of no advantage to the political situation in the state. On one hand, the state is promoting one people, one nation, one Singapore notion; on the other hand, it is reducing the people to a common identity, disconnecting them from identifying with their own ethnic group and culture. This political direction heavily influences the national music and education curriculum, after all music and art are powerful tools for nation building, with much emphasis on the main groups of people.

Pupils in the "Others" category will hardly learn music or art of their heritage in school. Even though the music syllabus may be an all-inclusive one, because options are given, there is no assurance that a group's music will be included. Even though education is supposed to promote "singular citizen identity and the pluralist of cultural identities" (Parker, 1997, p. 16), Singaporean education promotes the cultures of the majority groups, leaving behind the minorities. Thus, more research and study needs to be done on the minorities of the "Others" in Singapore, to let their voices be heard so that their existence is recognised by society.

Nonetheless, not all hope is lost. In my years of service, I have witnessed exceptions. For example, one secondary school engaged an instructor to teach the school dance group. This particular dance instructor teaches techniques that encompass the art forms of minorities and skills that students can transfer from one ethnic group to another. I recall an incident where the group had prepared a Malay dance for a national dance competition, but on the day of the competition, they brought the wrong music and had a Thai number instead. In the blink of an eye, the instructor had the students remove the sashes from the waists of their *kebaya* costumes and throw them over their shoulders like the shawl of a Thai costume, and she reorganised the dance steps and their hand placement. It was an eye opener. The students emerged as the champions of the competition. This would not have been possible if the students had not previously been exposed to Thai dancing. This particular instructor took it upon herself to teach students multi-dance cultures.

If all art and music teachers were like the above-mentioned dance instructor, they would see the importance in educating our children in multiple cultures besides those of the majority. They would heighten their consciousness of the cultures around them and take it upon themselves to integrate these cultures in their teaching. They could engage a specialist group to perform their art form during the assembly programme or include one more activity of the “Others” on Racial Harmony Day. If they were to do these things, then the connectivity of the art and music curriculum on multiculturalism would improve. To conclude, my agreement with myself has been sought. In my ideal world, I would rather be in a country where, although I may not belong to the racial group of the majority, the majority of people are sincerely sensitive towards other cultures and recognise everyone’s existence, then that is a true celebration of diversity. For my children, I pray that they will find their own identity in their own space and time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband and supervisors for their encouragement and support.

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Biographical note

Wendy Eikaas-Lee is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Music at the University of Otago, Dunedin. She researches how the Nepalese community in Singapore express and construct their cultural identity via music festivals. Wendy, an educator for over 15 years, believes that teaching is one way in which she can share her passion for ethnomusicology. Her interests include Festival Music, Diasporic Asian Music, Music Anthropology, Education, Musical Instruments, and Performing Arts.