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## *A Hyphenated Identity: Fostering National Unity Through Education in Malaysia and Singapore*

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**ABSTRACT** *Among plural societies, Malaysia and Singapore are two countries in Southeast Asia that face the challenges of ethnic diversity since their independence from British colonial rule. This paper offers a comparative study on Malaysia and Singapore in their governments' attempts to foster national unity through education. While both the governments adopt cultural pluralism, they have different approaches in the management of ethnic groups. The Malaysian government chooses to promote ethnic Malay interests through affirmative action policies in education, while the Singapore government professes to treat all the ethnic groups equally and claims that social mobility is determined by meritocracy. This paper focuses on the concept of 'ethnic-national hyphenated identity' and discusses the curricular challenges common to Malaysia and Singapore. It argues that efforts are needed to encourage the students to possess a greater sense of ethnic understanding and appreciation, coupled with a greater emphasis on critical inquiry and deliberation of ethnic issues in the curriculum.*

### **Introduction**

Ethnic diversity has always posed a challenge to national identity and unity in plural societies. The quest of each ethnic group to maintain its culture, religion and language may conflict with the central government's efforts in nation-building and integration. Tensions among the ethnic groups may also result from national issues such as the distribution of economic wealth and social services, and decisions regarding the national and official languages, political supremacy and cultural interests. The diversity of culture, religion and language, especially when any of these variables is used to provide special privileges to some groups and deny others equal opportunities to participate, may create ethnic inequality and ethnic polarisation, leading to contentions, instability, and upheaval (Hashim, 2005). Among the plural societies, Malaysia and Singapore are two countries in Southeast Asia that face the challenges of ethnic diversity since their independence from British colonial rule.

Malaysia, comprising Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak, is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country of approximately 22.04 million with a predominantly Muslim population. Historically, Malaya was ruled by Malay Sultans since the founding of

the Sultanate of Malacca in the fifteenth century. It was gradually colonised by the British since 1786. Malaya attained its independence in 1957 and became known as the Federation of Malaya. Malaysia was formed in 1963 through the political merger of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. However, due to political differences, Singapore separated and became a sovereign state in 1965. The population of Malaysia consisted of 65.9% bumiputras (Malay and other indigenous groups such as the Kadazan and Iban), 25.3% Chinese, 7.5% Indians and 1.3 % of other origin (Economic Planning Unit, 2006). The Malays are Muslims, the Indians are mainly Hindus or Sikhs, and the Chinese are primarily Buddhists or Taoists. There are also a small percentage of Indians and Chinese who are either Christians or Muslims. Malay language is the national language and Islam is the official religion. However, the Constitution guarantees religious freedom for adherents of other faiths and upholds the autonomy of the state governments in matters relating to Islam and Malay customs.

Singapore shares a close historical tie with Malaysia as it was part of the Malaysia Federation. Singapore was founded as a British trading post and colony in 1819 and was granted self-government in 1959. After a short-lived union with Malaysia in 1963, it was separated to become a sovereign state in 1965. With over 4.2 million people, Singapore comprises 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian and 1.4% Others. A majority of the population are Buddhists (42.5%), followed by Muslims (14.9%), Christians (14.6%), Taoists (8.5%) and Hindus (4.0%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). Like Malaysia, religious identity in Singapore is closely linked to ethnic identity. 64.4 % of Chinese are either Buddhists or Taoists, 99.6 % of Malays are Muslims, 55.4 % of Indians are Hindus, and about half of 'Others' are Christians. While Malay is designated as the national language, Malay, Mandarin (Putonghua) and Tamil are recognised as official languages, and English is given the status of lingua franca. There is no official religion as the government affirms religious freedom under a secular state.

This paper offers a comparative study on Malaysia and Singapore in their governments' attempts to foster national unity through education. These two countries are chosen as both are multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation-states with Muslim population. Both share a common past and close cultural ties, and rely on education as a vehicle to create and sustain a national identity. They both serve as a case-in-point demonstrating how despite the adoption of two opposing strategies in education for nation building, they yield almost similar outcomes with respect to national unity and economic disparity. The paper begins by explaining how the governments of Malaysia and Singapore adopt cultural pluralism by championing a 'hyphenated identity' for their citizens based on ethnicity and nationality. It then discusses the governments' attempts to promote this ethnic-national identity through the school curriculum, and the challenges that result from the state effort [1].

### **A Hyphenated Identity in Malaysia and Singapore**

The concept of 'ethnic-national hyphenated identity' is located within the framework of cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is a major approach towards nation building in multicultural nations. Adopted in Malaysia and Singapore, it is also known as the 'mosaic model' and is committed to one nation, many peoples and many cultures (Hill and Lian, 1995). In cultural pluralism, "members of the diverse groups are permitted to retain many of their cultural ways, as long as they conform to those practices deemed necessary for the survival of the society as a whole"

(Bennett, 1995:86). It involves a process of seeking compromises characterised by mutual appreciation and respect between two or more ethnic groups (Sills, 1968). Ethnicity plays a key role in the formation of a national identity in cultural pluralism; Hill and Lian (1995:95) describe such a national identity as “a hyphenated identity (ethnic-national)”. This hyphenated identity means that both the governments strive to foster national unity by instilling a common national identity that is based on ethnic diversity. The classification of citizens according to ethnicity is a legacy of the British rule in both Malaysia and Singapore (Ganuly, 1997; Hefner, 2001). After independence, the local governments in Malaysia and Singapore continued the linkage between nationality and ethnicity. The Malaysian government aims to inculcate a sense of Malaysian-ness and patriotism that is explicitly based on ethnic stratification (Brown, 2007). Likewise in Singapore, Chua notes that “[t]he presence of the three ‘homogenised’ Asian races enables the government and the people to claim Singapore to be a cultural space that is constituted by the intersections of, respectively, the Chinese-Confucian, Indic and Malay-Islamic cultures” (Chua, 2005:184). Unifying the various ethnic groups is a set of principles or values privileged by the government. In Malaysia, the national identity is enshrined in the country’s national ideology, called Rukunegara (pillars of the nation) that upholds five principles of belief in God; loyalty to King and Country; supremacy of the Constitution; primacy of the Rule of Law; and the importance of good behaviour and morality. In Singapore, a set of secular shared values (known as ‘Our Shared Values’) is promoted by the government in Singapore: nation before community and society before self; community support and respect for the individual; the family as the basic unit of society; consensus in place of conflict; and racial and religious harmony.

While both the governments share the principle of cultural pluralism through promoting an ethnic-national identity, they differ in their management of different ethnic groups. In Malaysia, the government advocates ethnic preference for the bumiputras and practises ethnically based affirmative action policies. Education is used to promote “Malay cultural, political, and economic hegemony while also endorsing multiculturalism and tolerance for the nation’s Chinese and Indian ‘minorities’” (Lincicome, 2005:199). The Malaysian government argues that preferential policies for the economically disadvantaged but numerically dominant Malays are a necessary component of the nation-building project (Brown, 2007). It argues further that this is necessary to undo the discrimination the Malays had suffered educationally and economically due to the British colonial education policies. Furthermore, it is argued that the competition among the ethnic groups would not be fair if one ethnic group already had a head start. By contrast, the Singapore government forswears any programmes for ethnically based affirmative action and prefers multiracialism, defined as “the practice of cultural tolerance towards the various communities; acceptance of differences in religious practices, customs and traditions of the different communities; and according each community equality before the law and equal opportunity for advancement” (Hill and Lian, 1995:31). The principle of meritocracy has been constantly used by the government to advocate that social mobility comes solely from one’s hard work, regardless of one’s ethnicity or background. However, some scholars have argued that the state policies have directly or indirectly favoured the majority ethnic Chinese population in Singapore (Hill and Lian, 1995; Ganuly, 1997; Lincicome, 2005). Hefner (2001:41) posits that the shared values are not “ethnically invisible” but are “based on the government’s long-standing and selective reinterpretation of Confucian values in a manner that emphasises loyalty to the state and capitalist self-discipline”.

Both the governments in Malaysia and Singapore leverage on education to achieve the twin objectives of promoting a national identity shared by all citizens regardless of ethnicity, and reinforcing separate ethnic identities as ascribed by the state. Schools are seen as ideal agents by both governments for social reproduction and transmission. The values, cultures, heritages, knowledge and skills of the society are transmitted to the next generation through the education system. Consequently, the philosophy and curriculum of the school are shaped by the worldview of the society (Tyler, 1975). Similarly, the citizenship curriculum reflects the tensions and contentions within a particular society due to the diverse cultural, historical and religious traditions (Lee, 2006). The next section looks at how the governments in Malaysia and Singapore aim to foster a united citizenship by promoting an ethnic-national identity through the school curriculum.

### **Fostering National Unity through Education in Malaysia**

The Malaysian government aims to foster national unity based on an ethnic-national identity through the curriculum, especially through civics, history, moral education, and Islamic education. Civics has been made a compulsory subject for all pupils from Standard IV to Form III for a period of 40 minutes in a week beginning in 1961. In the introduction to the syllabus, the Ministry stated its recognition of Malaysia as a plural society and the need to build a nation that is united. The unity aimed at was one that sprung from the spirit of cooperation and harmonious relations. The Civics syllabus revised in 1976 bore the themes of Rukunegara that was formulated in 1970 and aimed to achieve its goals. The objectives of Civics were to: (a) foster the spirit of patriotism, (b) inculcate an attitude of tolerance toward other races and groups, (c) develop independence and self-reliance, (d) develop a positive attitude towards change, and (e) to inculcate good character. Basically the content of the curriculum encompassed personal attitudes and responsibility, duties and rights of Malaysian citizens, the national identity, and the government. Among the attitudes desired were mutual respect, cleanliness, punctuality, independence or self-reliance, industry and respect for all kinds of honest work, sportsmanship, appropriate use of leisure time, respect and obedience to rules and the law. The syllabus reminded teachers of their role in maintaining harmonious relations between students of the various ethnic groups by being role models. However, Civics was discontinued when the government introduced Moral Education in 1983, as will be discussed later. But it was claimed by parents and Congress of Teachers Union that due to the omission of Civics, the younger generation does not seem to be civic conscious, responsible, relate well across different cultures and also does not display understanding of national issues. Consequently, it was restored into the curriculum in 2005.

In addition to civics education, the ideas of citizenship and patriotism are also propagated through the subject of history. In 1978 (KPM, 1978) the syllabus stated that the purposes of history were to understand the national identity through knowledge of the nation's history; to foster the spirit of togetherness toward the nation as a single unit; and to foster a common memory of history as a framework for national consciousness among Malaysian citizens. It looked at the Malaysian history from the Malaysian perspective, in contrast to the old syllabus that looked at it from the British perspective. With the introduction of the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary School (KBSM) in 1989, the subject was made compulsory for all students until the fifth year of secondary school and the number of periods was also increased from two to three. It is also evident that the new history curriculum (KPM,

2000) emphasises several historical themes: ethnic harmony, Malay rulers, and the importance of the concept of power sharing through the Barisan Nasional (BN), the ruling party, and its leadership in ensuring political stability.

In line with the emphasis on ethnic diversity, Moral Education (ME) was introduced for non-Muslims (non-Malays) while Islamic Education (IE) was intended for Muslims (Malays). ME for the primary school was introduced simultaneously with the implementation of the New Curriculum for Primary Schools in 1983 out of concern for the deterioration of moral values and indiscipline among teenagers, especially school-going children. In addition, it was felt that there was a vacuum in moral instruction for non-Muslim pupils. A recent syllabus (KPM, 1998:2) stated that the goal of the ME subject is “producing individuals of high morals through inculcation, internalisation and practice of noble values upheld by the Malaysian society”. Specifically, ME is to enable students to behave in accordance with their moral values; to be aware of, understand and internalise the norms and noble values of Malaysian society; to think rationally based on moral principles, to make rational, moral and ethical decisions; and to consistently observe sound moral principles. Twelve moral values - cleanliness, mercy, moderation, industry, gratitude, honesty, justice and fairness, love, respect, public-spiritedness, modesty, and freedom - based on the various religions, traditions and cultures of the Malaysian society and consonant with universal values, were taught in the primary schools. The curriculum is spiral and special emphasis is given to daily practices that could develop into good habits. It is taught for three periods a week in the secondary school with four additional values - courage, cooperation, self-reliance and rationality - to the twelve taught in the primary school. In 2000 the ME syllabus was revised and the primary school curriculum was reorganised around values related to five areas: (1) self-development; (2) self and family; (3) self and society; (4) self and the environment; and (5) self and country (Curriculum Development Centre, 1999). Values relating to country or citizenship include respect and obedience to the King, leaders and country; respect for rules and law; love for the country and peace and harmony.

If ME is the space for inculcating the 16 universal values for the non-Muslim students, those same values and more are supposed to be inculcated in Islamic Education (IE) for Muslim students. In fact the IE curriculum had evolved from one that highlighted only the theoretical concept of religion in the 1960s and 1970s to a concept of religion as a practical way of life in the early 1980s. This focus on principles of faith, worship, moral values and Qur’anic literacy was evident from the Primary Islamic Education syllabus first published in 1972. The school climate then did not reinforce religious beliefs through practices, hence, the negligence of the five daily prayers. For the secondary school, the curriculum underlined the study of the fundamentals of Islam, the Holy Qur’an, the Prophetic Traditions (saying and practice), Islamic History, Law, and moral values. The curriculum was criticised by scholars and non-governmental organisations because it did not portray the true broad expanse of Islam encompassing its political, economic and social systems, lacked moral reasoning and was traditional in approach. The curriculum was reorganised for it to be consistent with the educational reforms of 1988 for secondary schools. IE (KPM, 1988) was expanded to focus on four strands, namely proper reading and comprehension of the Qur’an (Tilawat al-Qur’an); science of the Islamic law (shari’ah); worship (ibadah) and values; and Islamic history (sirah) and civilization (tamadun). As a result of this new understanding, it is commonplace to find either a prayer room or a prayer hall in every national school today.

As mentioned earlier, the Malaysian government's vision of a hyphenated identity is based on ethnic preference for the bumiputras. While the government uses the curriculum to forge a national identity through specific curricular subjects, it also introduced affirmative action policies in education to rectify the economic imbalance between bumiputras and non-bumiputras, and to preserve Malay interests. This is carried out on the basis that eradicating economic disparities between the bumiputras and other ethnic groups is essential for nation building (Brown, 2007). The use of the bumiputra's special rights for the first time in education was introduced after the May 13th 1969 racial crisis. The underlying cause of this event has to be understood from the grievances of the Malays who had not been given equal opportunity for higher education. Before 1969 all the institutes of higher education and the universities (University of Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia) had English as a medium of instruction. Historically, the Malays were a deprived group with respect to English education because of physical inaccessibility due to the urban location of English schools, non-affordability due to Malay poverty, and the Christian orientation that alienated the Malays. English was considered an elite language and it divided between the rich and the poor across all ethnic groups. In addition, there were no Malay national secondary schools prior to 1958 which made it more difficult for the Malays to obtain education except religious education. This situation was not addressed by the government although Malay language was the national language. There was a wide gap between the major ethnic groups with respect to economic wealth and the number of professionals (Figure 1). Due to historical reason, the elite Malays were apparently trained only for the Malayan Civil Service. Thus, a time bomb had been created and it exploded during this event that saw the resignation of the then Prime Minister.

Figure 1: Distribution of Professionals in Malaysia, 1970 (percentage)

	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	Others
Accountancy	6.8	73.3	19.9
Architecture	4.3	82.3	13.4
Engineering	7.3	84.5	8.3
Medicine	3.7	85.0	11.3

Source: Fourth Malaysia Plan 1981-1985, Malaysia

As a consequence of this crisis, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to provide preferential treatment for the bumiputras. The supremacy of the national language was asserted through education by the gradual conversion from English to Malay language as the medium of instruction in all levels of National Schools with the exception of the National-Type Chinese and National-Type Tamil primary schools. Students enrolled in these primary schools are taught in their respective mother tongues – Mandarin and Tamil. The aspiration for a Malay and Islamic university by the Malay masses was finally met with the establishment of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia which has Malay language as its medium of instruction in 1970. However, the non-Malays had to make further sacrifices to address the economic imbalance due to the Malay lag in education. Other steps taken by the government under the New Economic Policy include the imposition of a quota system for admission to the university based on the racial proportion of 55:45 bumiputras to non-bumiputras; the establishment of special science residential secondary schools for the bumiputras, and the giving of overseas scholarships to

bumiputras to further their studies in science and technology. The last two steps serve as a strong incentive for the bumiputras to compete and excel in their studies, and to provide for the academic and human resources of the newly established university. However, in 2003 the quota system was revoked and study scholarships overseas have begun to be awarded to non-bumiputras. In fact the Private Higher Institutions of Education Act of 1996 allowed for the establishment of private universities and branch campuses of foreign universities to accommodate the increasing number of qualified students especially among the non-bumiputras.

### **Fostering National Unity through Education in Singapore**

Similar to the case in Malaysia, the Singapore government uses the school curriculum to foster national unity by underscoring the ethnic-national identity for its citizens. To instil a common national identity based on the shared values, the Singapore government introduced an array of subjects to inculcate civic values and national loyalty through the years. Since self-government in 1959, the government has implemented Ethics in 1959, followed by Civics in 1963, Education for Living in 1973, and Good Citizen, and Becoming and Becoming in the 1980s (Chew, 1998). The underlying objective was for all students to learn about the history of Singapore and the civics duties for them to be good citizens. Students currently learn about citizenship values through National Education (NE) which was introduced in 1997. NE aims to develop in all Singaporeans national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future (Ministry of Education, 2005). It sets out to promote greater understanding of different ethnic groups and religions by infusing citizenship values into the formal curriculum through subjects such as Civics and Moral Education (CME) and Social Studies, as well as outside the classroom via co-curricular activities and enrichment programs (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2004). A number of writers have pointed out that the rationales stated for primary and secondary CME syllabus focus on citizenship training (Tan, 1994; Chew, 1998; Tan & Chew, 2004; Tan & Chew, 2008; Tan, 2007; Tan, 2008a, 2008b). Through the five themes of 'self', 'nation', 'family', 'school', and 'society', students in primary schools are expected to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be loyal to the nation and contribute to the community. Likewise, the secondary school CME syllabus aims to "incorporate more concepts and contents that are relevant to meet the changing needs and future challenges of the nation" (Ministry of Education, 2000:2, as cited in Tan and Chew, 2005: 601).

Civic values are also promoted through Social Studies. Social studies in Singapore emphasises knowledge and understanding of national issues pertaining to historical, political, economic and social development of Singapore (Sim and Print, 2005; Nichol and Sim, 2007). According to the syllabus, the aims are to enable students to understand the issues that affect the socio-economic development, the governance and the future of Singapore; learn from experiences of other countries to build and sustain a politically viable, socially cohesive and economically vibrant Singapore; develop citizens who have empathy towards others and who will participate responsibly and sensibly in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society; and have a deep sense of shared destiny and national identity (as cited in Sim & Print, 2005:66).

The Singapore government also hopes to promote multiracialism by anchoring the identity of the Singaporeans in their cultural, linguistic and religious roots. The cultural and linguistic aspects are manifested in the bilingual policy for all government schools (Tan, 2006). Bilingualism in Singapore is defined not as

proficiency in any two languages but as proficiency in English which is recognised as the first language, and a second language, known as a 'Mother Tongue Language' (MTL). Three MTLs have been selected by the government for students in Singapore – Mandarin (Putonghua) for Chinese students, Malay for Malay students, and Tamil for most Indian students [2]. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore defines 'mother tongue' not by the language used at home or the first language learned by the student but by ethnicity. The government subscribes to the 'functional polarisation' of language (Pendley, 1983) where English is valued primarily for its economic contribution and the mother tongues for their cultural contribution. In other words, English is regarded as a neutral utilitarian language used in formal, controlling and specialised domains while the indigenous languages help the speakers maintain their ethnic identities through their cultural values and worldviews (Fishman, 1968). The former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong noted the link between the learning of one's mother tongue and the formation of one's ethnic identity: "To ensure that Singaporeans remain grounded in our ancestral Asian culture and values, we require our young to study their mother tongues in schools, be they Mandarin, Malay or Tamil" (Goh, 2004).

The government also attempted to leverage on the religious heritage of the ethnic groups by introducing Religious Knowledge (RK) in schools in the 1980s. This approach reflected the state's conflation of ethnic and religious identities, a tradition that was started during the colonial times when the British recognised the Malay sultans as the guardians of the Islamic faith. The implementation of RK was motivated by the government's concern that the young in Singapore were influenced by negative 'Western' moral values. The government leaders claimed that industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation had led to increasing social problems and the abandonment of traditional ethnic values (Gopinathan, 1980; Tan, 2000). The government hoped that learning about the religions traditionally subscribed by the various ethnic groups in Singapore would help the young imbibe sound moral and civic values. RK was taught in all secondary schools from 1984 to 1989. Students had a total of six options: Bible Knowledge (in English), Islamic Religious Knowledge (in English and Malay), Buddhist Studies (in Chinese and English), Confucian Ethics (in Chinese and English), Hindu Studies (in English), and Sikh Studies (in English).

As RK was meant to support the moral values the Government wanted to inculcate in the young, there was a strong emphasis on RK's moral aspects. For example, the Ministry of Education (MOE) stated that Buddhist Studies aimed to help students "acquire the qualities of moral awareness, social responsibility and psychological maturity" (CPD, 1988:14). For Confucian Ethics, it was pointed out that pupils should know "the importance of self-cultivation, the different Confucian forms of life and the network of human relatedness". However, RK was withdrawn after 1989, due ironically to the fear of inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. The government believed that the exclusive study of one religion by students had accentuated religious differences and led to proselytising by certain religious groups (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2004; Tan, 2008b). Kuo, Quah and Tong (1988) reported that the introduction of RK, especially Buddhist Studies and Bible Knowledge, had unintentionally attracted the young from especially Taoism to these religions. The teaching of RK also coincided with the broader trend of religious revivalism and shifts in the 1980s, and the government did not want RK to heighten inter-religious tensions and disagreements.

RK was replaced by Civics and Moral Education (CME) in 1992, and by National Education (NE) from 1997 onwards. That one of six messages of NE is the



preservation of racial and religious harmony testifies to the importance of multiracialism for schools in Singapore. To propagate an appreciation of one's ethnic identity as well as those of other ethnic groups, one of the modules for CME is Community Spirit where the aim is: 'Fostering a greater sense of belonging to and care for the community, as well as cultural and religious appreciation'. Specifically, the textbook states that the materials aim to help students learn the following (CPDD, 2001:33):

- the importance of maintaining unity in diversity by being aware of the beliefs and customs of the major racial and religious groups in our multi-cultural and multi-religious society;
- some aspects of the major systems of beliefs in Singapore and some common values that can be found in the teachings of these systems of beliefs;
- the significance of some festivals celebrated by various racial and religious groups in Singapore;
- some desirable attitudes and behaviour that promote harmonious living in our harmonious living in our multicultural and multi-religious society; and
- some ways of enhancing racial and religious harmony.
- Through CME and NE, the government continues to advocate ethnic and religious understanding and harmony for its citizens, thereby building up the ethnic-national identity of its citizens.

### **Curricular Challenges in Malaysia and Singapore**

It is evident from the preceding discussion that the governments in Malaysia and Singapore take the promotion of an ethnic-national identity through education seriously. However, there are two main curricular challenges in the implementation of the curriculum to foster national unity in both countries. The first challenge is the need for a greater understanding and appreciation of ethnic issues. In Malaysia, the fact that ME is meant for the non-Muslim Malaysians and is taught separately from the Muslim Malays who are taught Islamic Education would not help in bridging understanding of similarities and differences of values among the various ethnic groups that could enhance mutual respect and toleration. Adding to this challenge is the limited interaction between the Malay and non-Malay students in National Primary Schools. The small number of non-Malay students in the National schools means that they are usually put in the same class, separate from the Malay students, to facilitate the scheduling of the class timetable for ME. The ME classes have also not helped non-Muslim students to understand and appreciate their own great cultural traditions, values and heritage because the approach adopted is more like 'values clarification' class. Some critics have mentioned the fear that what is being propagated is secular morality because the moral values taught are not based on any religious beliefs (Murthi, 1993; Hashim, 1996, 2002; Singh and Mukherjee, 1990). This is unsatisfactory as what most Malaysian parents desire are the teachings of their cultural and religious traditions and values for their children in schools.

Similarly in the case of Singapore, the curriculum is insufficient to help the students understand the various cultural and religious beliefs and practices. The 'phenomenological approach' has been adopted by the Singapore government in the teaching of religious knowledge in schools (Tan, 2008a). The purpose is to inform students about the various belief systems, and not to impart religious faith or induce religious experience to the students. This can be seen in the objective, neutral and

crisp way in which the religious beliefs and practices are introduced. Given the informational and emotionally detached treatment of religion under the phenomenological approach, it is questionable whether this approach is effective in bringing about moral conviction in the students. The other shortcoming of the curricular approach is the conflation of religious and ethnic contents in the curriculum. Religious knowledge is taught in the Secondary 3 textbook for Civics and Moral Education (CPDD, 2001). The terms 'religious' and 'racial' are used almost always together, and little distinction is made between the two. The conflation of cultural and religious beliefs and practices is also evident on the official NE website. For example, the website on 'Racial Harmony' lists the Chinese cultural practice of using chopsticks and celebrating Chinese New Year together with the litany of religious festivals such as Vesak Day, Deepavali, Easter and Hari Raya Puasa (Ministry of Education, 2002). In the description on the Hungry Ghosts Festival, the website explains that the Chinese believe that during the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the gates of hell are opened and all spirits are free to roam the earth and visit their living relatives for a month. This is inaccurate as not all Chinese subscribe to this festival which is more accurately described as a religious festival commemorated by Taoists who are not necessarily Chinese (Tan, 2008a).

Secondly, the curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore needs to encourage more critical inquiry and open deliberation – attributes which are important to develop a deeper understanding of inter-ethnic issues. In Malaysia, the existing school curriculum has not been designed to handle issues such as Special Malay Rights, the National Language, the Sovereignty of the Malay Rulers and the Internal Security Acts. Neither are the teachers educated to handle them. In fact, these issues are still considered sensitive and legally forbidden. The curriculum for history seems to brush aside certain past controversies that involved ethnic discord. Similarly for ME, the way the subjects are taught does not enhance reasoning skills and ME teachers more frequently employ the lecture method rather than student-centred pedagogies such as the 'community of inquiry' approach. Neither moral philosophy that exposes teachers to moral theories and reasoning, nor Islamic worldview to help understand the Muslim mind, is taught. Teachers themselves are also not consistently modelling the moral values taught in these subjects. It is arguable whether the promotion of 'national unity' is best served by glossing over those past controversies or by encouraging students to actively participate in the debates of the time. To nurture rational and enlightened citizens, these issues must be deliberated by the students especially those in the upper secondary and tertiary levels. It will not be sound to sweep important issues under the carpet because it will be like nurturing a time bomb. Waghid (2005:332) avers that "[i]f open deliberative argumentation cannot unfold in university and school classrooms, it reduces the chance of producing active democratic citizens who can one day enter and play a meaningful role in the public realm". However, the discussion of such concepts and values as freedom, rights, goods, justice and democracy are complex and philosophical, and has to be accompanied by empathy, compassion and good faith. Therefore, teachers ought to be trained to be literate and enlightened on these issues so that they can handle the discussion wisely in class.

Likewise in Singapore, the curriculum for CME is "training students to absorb pragmatic values deemed to be important for Singapore to achieve social cohesion and economic success, rather than moral education as the development of intrinsic commitment to and habituation in the practice of values defended on autonomous moral considerations and not mere national expediency" (Tan and Chew, 2004:597; also see Tan and Chew, 2008). While the CME syllabus for primary and even lower

secondary levels is salutary in guiding students to progress from Kohlberg's Level One to Two of moral development, there is no progression to the next level that is characterised by authentic moral motivation and reasoning where the motive is morally intrinsic (Tan and Chew, 2004). In fact, the CME's emphasis on pragmatism and relativism entails the sliding back to Kohlberg's Level One of acting on self-regarding motivation. Tan and Chew (2004) conclude that there is a need to encourage students to aim towards more Kantian considerations where one acts morally because of intrinsic reasons, and not purely because of utilitarian reasons stipulated by the state.

The common curricular problems faced in Malaysia and Singapore stem from their similar philosophy and approach towards citizenship education. In studying the citizenship values in Singapore, Malaysia and China, Kennedy (2004) reports that what is common in these three countries is the emphasis on the larger good (also see Tan, 2008c). He notes that "the emphasis for citizens is not so much the rights they enjoy but the responsibilities they have towards family and the community" (Kennedy, 2004:15). Consistent with the collectivist focus is the transmission approach for citizenship education in Malaysia and Singapore (Tan, 2008c). Such an approach constructs 'good citizens' as those who are fitted into an established social and value system for the sake of maintenance. To achieve this, well-defined knowledge is transmitted and desired values are inculcated (Lo and Man, 1996). This is contrasted with the reflective-inquiry approach that focuses on nurturing abilities necessary in the consensus building effort of a democratic society. These abilities include reasoning, deliberation, decision-making, and conflict-resolution in individuals. The transmission approach explains why the curricular contents and pedagogy in Malaysia and Singapore do not focus on promoting critical inquiry and open deliberation. It is a moot point whether this approach is sufficient for citizens of various ethnic groups in Malaysia and Singapore to learn and appreciate the cultural and religious diversities in their society.

## Conclusion

The world has seen a shift from cultural assimilation to cultural pluralism. For example, the United States and England adopted a melting pot or assimilation policy in the eighteenth century till the second half of the twentieth century while Canada has employed the salad bowl or the pluralistic policy. However, towards the end of the last millennium, even the United States and England have shifted their position from cultural assimilation to cultural pluralism, and ethnic diversity became pronounced especially in educational content.

Against this international backdrop, a comparative study of Malaysia and Singapore illustrates the contrasting approaches adopted by governments to build a united citizenry through education. Using the concept of a hyphenated identity in Malaysia and Singapore, this paper pointed out that the states in both countries emphasise both the ethnic and national identity of their citizens. The Malaysian government promotes ethnic Malay interests through affirmative action policies in education, while the Singapore government advocates the principle of meritocracy. This paper further analysed the curricular challenges common to Malaysia and Singapore. It argued that efforts are needed to encourage the students to possess a greater sense of ethnic understanding and appreciation, coupled with a greater emphasis on critical inquiry and deliberation of ethnic issues in the curriculum. Our discussion also showed that while religion is more dominant in Malaysia through Islamic Education for Muslim students who are the majority in the country, ethnicity

plays a bigger role in Singapore where Chinese Confucian ideas such as collectivism are privileged by the state. In both cases, we witness strong state intervention in educational policies and curriculum to serve the national agenda. A continual and formidable challenge for plural societies such as Malaysia and Singapore is to unite the nation based on both ethnicity and nationality – a hyphenated identity that appears so attractive to multi-ethnic societies and yet is so fraught with tensions and contentions.

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#### NOTES

- [1] Although this paper only focuses on the concept of ethnic-national hyphenated identity in Malaysia and Singapore, the authors are aware that there are other major issues that are pertinent to citizenship education in Malaysia and Singapore. For further readings on contemporary issues affecting Asia and the Pacific, such as the impact of globalisation on national identity; the relationship between democracy and citizenship education; and recent developments on citizenship curriculum in the region, refer to Lee, Grossman, Kennedy and Fairbrother (2004); and Grossman, Lee and Kennedy (2008).
- [2] Until the mid 1990s, Indian students in Singapore whose ethnic language is not Tamil have to choose either Tamil, Mandarin or Malay as their Mother Tongue Language (MTL). But these students found studying these foreign languages a great struggle and many performed poorly in the national examinations. In response to the appeal from the Indian community, the Singapore Ministry of Education recognises five Indian languages apart from Tamil – Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Urdu – as MTLs that can be taken at national examinations for these students.

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