



## Article

# Developing Intercultural Mindedness through an Experiential Learning Activity—A Case Study from Singapore

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**Abstract:** Recent incidents of alleged racism worldwide amid the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged us to ponder on the meaning and importance of intercultural education. However, it can be difficult to understand the ways in which intercultural discourse can be beneficial for learning, as well as prepare young people to act against racism and inequalities to work towards a more sustainable future. This study presents analysis of learning materials from a case study conducted in one secondary school in Singapore. The objective of the activity is for students to engage in intercultural learning by participating in walking trails with different themes in a few neighborhoods, to learn more about the history of and life in multiracial Singapore. Researchers followed and observed the two-day event and collected data from the students. Specifically, written reflections from a trail named Many Races—One Nation were collected from the students, as well as their reflective posters at the end of the event. The content analysis of these artefacts concentrates on the meanings and ideologies underlying intercultural learning through an examination of the learning materials and the students' responses. Furthermore, this study introduces an intercultural mindedness framework that transcends the conflict avoidance approach for deeper learning.

**Keywords:** racial harmony; qualitative research; Singapore; art of the contact zone theory; intercultural mindedness



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## 1. Introduction

The inclusion of a more critical stance on interculturality has been proposed [1,2], into the school curriculum and discussed as one solution to enhance global education and sustainable development in increasingly diverse societies. Assessment tools to measure intercultural competence have been developed (see for example [3,4]) and in 2018, the OECD incorporated Global Competence assessment measures into the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) to evaluate students' capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues. Instead of focusing on developing intercultural competency, we deliberately chose to use the term intercultural mindedness to refer to intercultural learning geared towards social change. We adapted "intercultural mindedness" from the conception of global mindedness as a multidimensional concept concerned with how students think about and engage with interculturality and diversity [5].

Competencies measured at a certain time and place do not capture the complexity of dispositions that may change from interaction to interaction [6]. More importantly, contemporary intercultural education does not necessarily embrace competition, but encourages us to focus on wisdom as manifested in everyday experiences. Wisdom refers to learning through bodily experiences [7] and intercultural learning by negotiating dispositions. Instead of the common framework for intercultural competence as a set of attitudes, skills and awarenesses in communication, our intercultural mindedness framework aims for a more critical (Freirean [8]) education, where a normative vision grounded in a utopian aspiration for change is unpacked to create new types of dialogue in education. The wisdom gained

through these bodily experiences, for example, of discrimination, may determine the position that individuals take in the dialogue. The aim of the dialogue and sharing these experiences is to allow alternative voices and perspectives to frame the learning towards intercultural mindedness.

The key aim of this study is to deliberate on the “intercultural mindedness” which we should cultivate in young people. Intercultural mindedness in this study refers to the way in which we think about the world and engage with diversity in contexts characterized by plurality, complexity, uncertainty and inequality, as well as how these translate into how we work with others (see also the framework for interculturality by Dervin [1,2]). Moving towards a critical stance, we need to understand the opportunities available at school for students to share incidents and handle conflicts, and for the nurturing of intercultural learning. This study was part of a larger funded research project called *Navigating Diversities and Differences in Singaporean Schools: An Exploratory Study on Students’ Intercultural Mindedness*.

This paper focuses on young people and their learning opportunities for navigating intercultural encounters. The guiding questions for this study are: What are the opportunities for young people to negotiate, and co-construct their understanding of, diversities during a school activity that contribute toward cultivating intercultural mindedness? What are the opportunities for creating safe spaces to negotiate diversities, and on what terms? We start by investigating the key terms used for intercultural learning in the activity, the meaning attributed to these terms and who decides on the use of those terms [6].

The contemporary understanding of (intercultural) learning proposes to connect students’ formal and informal learning experiences across time and space (in this study, the school and different neighborhoods in Singapore). The pedagogical aim of transformation necessitates learning tasks that resemble current and complex real-life problems [9–11]. These kinds of learning tasks aim to expand the experience by changing the criteria for contributions by students and bringing in new stakeholders with whom students share and discuss their observations, opinions and reflections. In these situations, students may find that the knowledge and cultural resources that they acquire become functional cultural tools that also apply in other spheres of life beyond school [10] (see also [11]). The civic education curriculum in Singapore includes school activities that take place outside the school, such as learning journeys. In addition, a focus on inquiry has been increasingly emphasized in the social studies curriculum in Singapore. Apart from the inquiry approach, another key feature in the design of the syllabus is the use of narratives and personal accounts: “Using narratives and personal accounts facilitates students’ understanding of important concepts and terminology and serve as triggers to set the context for studying an issue” [12].

In this paper, we will first frame intercultural mindedness in the Singaporean context. Then, this paper will attempt to examine the learning experience as a case study, and discuss the concepts used for intercultural learning during an excursion activity, known also as a learning journey in the Singapore context. The elements of diversity in this study are discussed within the framework of conflict zones as safe spaces [13–15], and in light of recent developments in scholarly discussions on diversities in education and the work of Li and Dervin [16] on intercultural education in the East. It will point to practical strategies that can shift students toward deep culture learning, which in turn has the potential to forge a sustainable intercultural education.

## 2. Towards Intercultural Mindedness in Education

Intercultural education and competence have been claimed by some to be a Western invention that is insensitive to the varying ways in which interculturality can be constructed in different sociocultural and political contexts [6]. Much is known about intercultural learning, which often is defined in terms of becoming aware of ethnocentrism, and learning to understand and respect diversity and interact in intercultural encounters [1]. However, a greater emphasis is needed to understand how to educate young people to advocate for social change towards more just actions and dialogue between human, nations (and

nature), which is the aim of intercultural mindedness. To counteract this, scholars have proposed the need for the meanings of the terms and contexts used in intercultural learning to be meaningful for the students [6,17]. In her own teaching, Pratt [13,14] realized that the school curriculum did not necessarily meet the expectations and needs of all students. Consequently, they did not feel as though they can be part of the learning process, thus undermining their sense of belonging in the school setting. For Pratt [13,14,18], the art of contact zones is in encouraging students to bring different histories, languages and knowledge systems into the classroom, reshaping national narratives in a manner that is relevant to them [13,14,18]. For Pratt, an education that nurtures intercultural mindedness should encourage debate and accommodate the discussion of conflicting discourses as a part of the contact zones, where new understandings are co-constructed with members of the learning community.

In addition to Pratt's contact zone theory, the concept of safe spaces has been used in education as an important metaphor for schools and classrooms as places where controversial issues can be discussed. It originated from the LGBT movement and was originally a physical meeting place for people to share their experiences in a safe environment [15]. Safe spaces are one example of constructive contact in a conflict zone. It specifically aims to create a time and place for those experiencing discrimination to share and be accepted without prejudice. Flenshner and Von der Lippe [15] questioned, though, what is it that students need to be safe from and what can possibly make the school and classroom an unsafe place. Mardiana et al. [19], in their study on everyday multiculturalism experienced by students in one Singapore school, discuss the majority–minority dynamics at work when it comes to ethnic languages, skin color and the educational streaming system, among others, that affect the lived experiences of diversities for young people. Their findings suggest that some students' ambivalent behaviors revealed uncertainties in responding to tensions.

Singapore is often referred to as a model multicultural society; nonetheless, the mainstream racial harmony discourse does not include a discussion of majority–minority power relationships and personal experiences, or interpretations of harmony. Yet research suggests young people from diverse backgrounds go to school sharing common spaces and negotiating everyday multiculturalism, with racism and prejudices forming a part of the experience [20].

Therefore, young people need opportunities to be heard and involved in co-constructing their education and understanding of different personal histories. For this, we propose the term “intercultural mindedness” to counteract the conflict avoidance approach to harmony and of educating young people to negotiate conflicts in a safe environment. Yuan et al. [6] in their article on Chinese *minzu* education as an alternative to Western diversity education, proposed that any diversity education should consider: what meaning is given to the terms used by students, such as respect and tolerance? Are the terms similarly understood and meaningful for those involved? What ideologies are found behind these terms and discussions and whose purpose do they serve, and how can we open up interculturally minded education to be inclusive of other voices? [6] p. 464.

Singaporean society operates on a system of meritocracy that functions within asymmetrical power relations based on factors such as ethnicity, language, immigration status, income, gender and the educational streaming system [21]. If Pratt's [13,14] contact zone theory is applied to the multicultural classroom, the classroom can be seen as a social space in which people meet, clash and struggle with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical power relations [13] p. 6. This type of curriculum may create affordances for students to become mindful of each other's life stories and, at the same time, problematize the idea of a single narrative. Young people living in a multicultural society are building intercultural mindedness through their everyday experiences and negotiations. Intercultural mindedness should be about dialogue, safe spaces and opportunities for students to express their opinions and have a say in what they learn and how they learn in interaction

with others. Li and Dervin ([16]; see also [6]) proposed a model for such dialogues that consists of:

1. Modesty from all those involved in comparing and complementing forms of intercultural education
2. Realism (what agendas are hidden behind the “beautified” pictures that one projects of one’s own system/culture when it comes to diversity?)
3. Myth hunting (what part of education is based on myths, commonsense and ideologies that need debunking?)
4. Decentering (can I see myself through the other based on similarities but also differences?)

This model is used as a reference for our analysis in this paper.

### 3. Racial Harmony in Singapore

Although this paper does not directly address the education of racial harmony, it is first necessary to understand “harmony” as an “official” ideology within which interculturality is taught and accepted in the education context of Singapore. Singapore’s centralized education system is built on a notion of multiracial multiculturalism, which is premised on the goal of racial and religious harmony, supported by values such as consensus and national unity [22,23]. Harmony has been emphasized throughout governance by the same Singaporean political party for over 50 years, under a multicultural framework where diversity is understood mainly through the racial categories of Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (CMIO). The categories do not capture the range of realities on the ground, whether it be Singaporeans of mixed heritage, or the non-resident migrant work force which comprised 37.38% of the Singapore labor force in 2018 (Singapore Population Statistics 2018).

Racial Harmony Day has become an occasion (21st of July) on which schools reflect upon and celebrate Singapore’s “success” as a racially harmonious society built on a rich diversity of culture and heritage. In reality, scholars have observed that Racial Harmony Day celebrations over the years have largely remained about celebrating different foods, festivals and fashions, or surface culture learning. The learning activities associated with the event have been found wanting for its simplistic presentation of cultures. There is a need to engage in more meaningful deep culture learning [22,24].

While celebrating racial harmony is important, a conflict avoidance approach toward harmony does not actually resolve any tension around societal diversity, but merely maintains convivial relationships in a superficial manner among people with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds [20,22].

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. A case study is an empirical method that investigates a certain phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, and is therefore suitable for this study [25]. A case study is an intensive study of a single, relatively bounded unit (the case) or a small number of units (the cases) to understand a larger class of similar units [26].

The unit of study here is a learning journey in Singapore focused on intercultural education. The objective of the learning journey and its related activities was to learn more about intercultural encounters, and the cultures, histories and lives of different people in Singapore. The program was outsourced to the National Heritage Board (NHB) and included a 1.5-day, guided neighborhood walk, with specific learning objectives and materials produced by NHB as well as a post-walk lesson in school. The introductory material for the excursion placed an emphasis on cross-cultural and heritage understanding: *“Cross border movement of people, goods and data brings/ has brought more cultures into contact with one-another, and this increases the potential of cross culture communication. Our young will therefore need a broader worldview, and the ability to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, with different ideas and perspectives. At the same time, they should be informed*

*about national issues, take pride in being Singaporean and contribute actively to the community.*" (Preparation material for the learning journey).

#### 4.1. Data Collection

Written learning materials, observation notes and visual data are used to explain the learning experiences in one Singaporean secondary school (the Autonomous Government Co-educational School). Since intercultural understanding is one of the areas that the school finds important to develop, they organized this excursion for the second-year students in the secondary school (students were 13–14 years of age during the data collection period) as part of their intercultural learning. The "autonomous" status of some government schools in Singapore means that they follow the national syllabus, but also offer a wider range of programmes to enhance the students' learning experiences and develop their talents.

The students were provided booklets by NHB for each different trail. The trail under scrutiny for this paper is the trail named Many Races—One Nation. The booklet consisted of pre- and post-trail questions for the student to answer. The exercise consisted of students filling in responses to questions in the booklets as they explored different sites in Singapore. The pre-trail questions were related to the different ethnic groups and religions in Singapore. The key question in the booklet focused on racial harmony, with the title: "What does racial harmony mean to you?" The first question posed to the student was "(1) Why is racial harmony important?" The second question asked the students to "(2) Name two values that are key to preserving racial harmony in Singapore", and the third asked, "(3) What can you do to preserve and promote the racial harmony in Singapore?" The findings section below focuses on the content analysis of the responses to questions (2) and (3).

A total of 215 booklets were collected and analysed; however, the number of answers provided varied based on how many blanks there were for the different questions. The students carried the booklets with them when visiting different religious sites in Singapore that were part of the Many Races—One Nation trail. We, the researchers, observed and followed along during the activities. Later at school, the students were grouped to reflect on their learning through words and drawings on posters. The posters were collected to demonstrate the more in-depth learning gained from the trail under scrutiny.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

The case study data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to guide the study at two levels. Firstly, it was organized in the main and sub-categories to understand on what terms the actions towards interculturality were negotiated amongst youngsters. Secondly, the values reflected by the students were organized according to the number of times they were mentioned, to understand if there were any specific values dominating the discussion, and how "unified" or diversified the voices of young Singaporeans towards harmony (and furthermore conflict) were [27]. Furthermore, the analysis referenced the framework by Li and Dervin [16]; see also [6] to propose a framework for intercultural mindedness in the Singaporean context. Observation notes and visual data from across the classes were used to complement the analysis, and to further understand the meaning (if any) the students gave to the terms and values reflecting harmony and intercultural learning.

#### 4.3. Visual Data Supplementing the Results

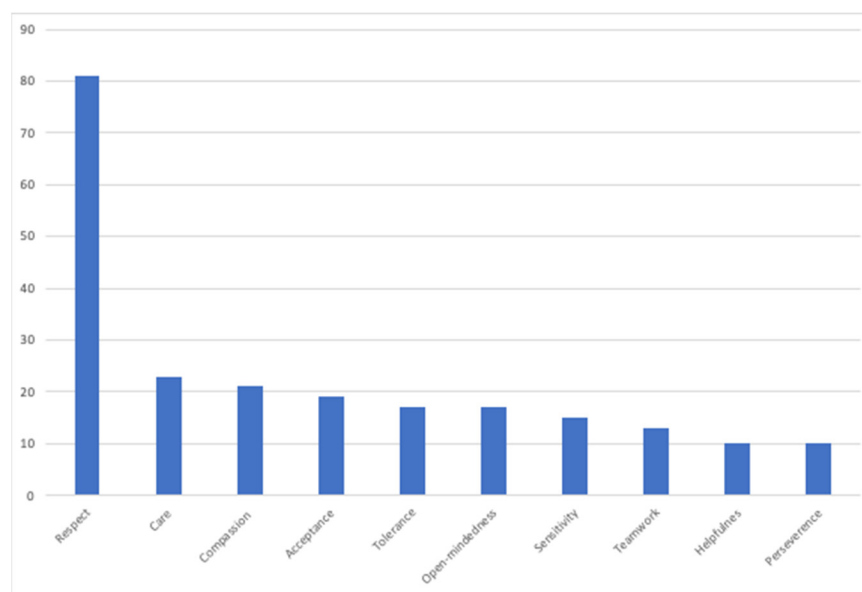
After the activity, the students held a feedback session, forming groups to discuss their learning experiences and how they can strengthen harmonious living in Singapore. They were asked to reflect on what they saw and the sentiments this evoked in them. Pink [28] (see also [29]) introduced visual data, such as pictures and videos, as invoking methods to supplement more established qualitative methods. The students made posters and visual presentations that were used together with their fieldnotes to discuss their learning experiences. The posters were used to strengthen the analysis and overall understanding of what themes and discourses were initiated by the students when they were given the platform to do so.



## 5. Discussion of Findings

### 5.1. Intercultural Learning or Chasing the Myth?

Developing intercultural mindedness is about accepting multiple voices and truths. Li and Dervin [16] proposed problematizing the intercultural learning and common-sense knowledge that we take for granted. This means that the role of intercultural education should not be merely educating students on one predominant view of what should be, but should allow students to navigate within a safe space to unpack the meanings and values of what the sites mean to them. The questions in the booklet were phrased: “Name two values that are key to preserving racial harmony in Singapore”. This already sets the frame for harmony as something that is given and unquestioned [22,30], without input from the students. The following Figure 1 demonstrates the top ten values students reflected in their answers about the two most important values for maintaining harmony (question 2), and the times they were mentioned. We collected 200 responses out of 215 booklets, as some students did not respond to the questions. Since we are exploring the intercultural mindedness of students, we were also interested in investigating how students make sense of such learning experiences and the concepts related to intercultural learning. *Respect*, which was mentioned 81 times, represents 41% of all the responses, followed by *care* (one answer was care and concern), which was mentioned 23 times (12%). The rest of the top ten values were *compassion* (mentioned 21 times, 11%), *acceptance* (mentioned 19 times, 10%), *tolerance* (mentioned 17 times, 9%), *open mindedness*, (also mentioned 17 times, 9%), *sensitivity* (mentioned 15 times, 9%), *teamwork* (mentioned 13 times, 7%), *helpfulness* (mentioned 10 times, 5%) and *perseverance* (mentioned 10 times, 5%).



**Figure 1.** Summary of the top ten most commonly listed values important to the maintenance of racial harmony in Singapore (number of answers out of 200 responses).

In addition, the values that were listed less than 10 times were *kindness* (n9), *harmony* (n7), *consideration* (n7), *equality* (n6), *non-judgmental* (n5), *responsibility* (n3), *unity* (n3), *love* (n3), *cooperation* (n3), *thoughtfulness* (n2) and *religion* (n2). Religion is not exactly a value, but more of a belief system. The guide was observed going through the distinctions between religion, ethnicity, and nationality with one group of students, which is important to understand in multicultural Singapore. Apart from the above values, there were some less popular one-word responses written by the students, such as *forgotten*, *curiosity*, *willingness*, *honesty*, *sharing*, *resilience*, *open* and *faithful*. A few had registered their responses with phrases such as “don’t look at their differences”, “appreciation of difference” and “willing to learn about others, open-minded and know what and when to say” (student responses in the booklets).

The last response may reflect a perceived sensitivity to the topic—as it requires an open mind and, at the same time, the ability to know what to say and when. Perhaps this reflects the Shared Values that were formalized by the parliament of Singapore on 15 January 1991, of which consensus was a valued feature. The Shared Values are: (1) Nation before community and society above self, (2) Family as the basic unit of society, (3) Community support and respect for the individual, (4) Consensus, not conflict and (5) Racial and religious harmony. *Respect, tolerance and acceptance*, unsurprisingly aligning somewhat with the Shared Values, were on the top-10 list. However, these terms have often been treated as self-evident and their meanings rarely unpacked. For example, little has been questioned about who has the power to tolerate and accept, and who are the ones being tolerated and accepted within majority–minority relations. We observed no room for discussion on these terms in the booklet and post-trail activities. Phillips [31] warned about the danger of such values becoming empty signifiers or misnomers, aiming more for students to answer the questions correctly instead of encouraging critical reflection on history and the current situation.

Some of the values represent “schoolbook” examples of the ideal in terms of racial harmony discourse and intercultural encounters. However, some of the values, such as compassion and concern, would be very interesting to unpack and reflect upon further. For instance, what does compassion look like for the students, and what actions does it entail in terms of the idea of safe spaces? Scholars such as Lipponen [32] suggested that compassion entails many regulations related to the education context, including one proposing that everyone should be included. Sometimes, pedagogical solutions such as practicing mindfulness are reported to decrease bullying and manage stress among students [33,34]. However, unless the differential treatment of different values and dispositions is brought to attention, it often remains an individual’s responsibility to manage stress when discriminative practices are not made visible. Intercultural mindedness is about negotiating between diverse perspectives and learning from these discriminative practices.

Conventional learning in schools is often tied to set curricula, teacher talk and textbook examples of right answers [9,10] rather than thinking of how the learning goals are actually achieved and what the role of students in the learning process is. Yuan et. al. [6] remind us that terms used in intercultural learning need to be meaningful for the students.

## 5.2. Intercultural Learning as Harmony-Conflict and Sameness-Differences Binaries

With some understanding of the values these young students regard most important in relation to racial harmony, we move on to exploring another question from the learning material on the importance of racial harmony (with *harmony* again taken for granted). This is one example from a booklet where a student had written: “*With many races and religions living together, conflicts break out easily due to actions and preferences. Thus, we need to compromise and exercise racial harmony.*” This response from a student is something that is repeated in the national narrative of harmony and the research on it [22]. Furthermore, these examples from the students’ responses on the importance of harmony demonstrate a harmony–conflict binary:

- “To avoid racial riots”
- “So that there are no wars”
- “Without Racial Harmony, Singapore would not be a safe place, as different religions would not understand each other and misunderstandings would happen often”
- “Singapore without racial harmony may have racial riots”

The idea of safe spaces in Singapore is associated with racial harmony, while conflicts and riots constitute non-safe spaces. Terms such as riots, fights and non-safe places were used to describe a situation without harmony. In terms of the discourses on safe and non-safe spaces, Said [35] emphasized the role that binary oppositions play in constituting the politics of power-knowledge *vis-à-vis* the epistemology of imperialism, including nationalism. Henry Giroux’s [36] writings about the pedagogy of fear after the 9/11 attacks is a good reminder for post COVID-19 education. He explained how fear may result in

the creation of false imaginaries of distrust and discrimination against people with certain backgrounds. Conflicts are often treated as violent threats to peace. However, in Pratt's contact zone theory [13,14], conflicts are unavoidable, and they can be constructive if those involved are provided with a safe space to negotiate meanings. Based on this reflection, it is paramount that school curriculums have space to deliberate on tensions-related intercultural encounters and nurture students' intercultural mindedness and negotiation skills.

The analysis of the student responses indicate that harmony is seen as important, as aligning with the Shared Values is considered a collective societal effort:

- “We must stand together”
- “We can do better together”
- “Keep our country together”

The students' responses seemed to promote unity and the unit of “we”. Yet, in Singapore, with its rapidly changing demographics, “we” may need some unpacking to see if everyone feels equally included. This would require including these students' responses in future curriculums, and creating a safe space for discussion and the rethinking of the sensitivity of these issues. Both Freire [8] and later, Pratt [13,14] state that problematizing education is not about expressing and teaching one's own worldview, but about setting up a dialogue where different worldviews are presented and discussed. We noticed that on the importance of racial harmony, the students' answers seem not to acknowledge or accommodate any existing differences, with statements such as:

- “Everyone is equal”
- “We are all the same”
- “We are one”

It is as if there can only be harmony if sameness exists. The reality, of course, is that differences do exist, we cannot pretend they do not and we think that we can achieve harmony by simply avoiding differences. The conflict of discourse is a concept that allows for a fairer representation of voices and for young people to feel they can co-construct the meanings of harmony, as one example, and in this way engage in societal participation.

To continue working towards racial harmony, another question students were asked in the booklet was: What can you do to preserve and promote the racial harmony in Singapore? (harmony again as taken for granted). Utilizing qualitative content analysis, we were able to identify three main themes from the student responses (215 booklets): (1) crossing race and cultural boundaries, (2) the school's role in providing learning activities and (3) the role of the self-other relationship in promoting harmony. Each of the main themes had subthemes, as indicated in the following Table 1, complemented with examples from the data.

In their responses (see Table 1. Crossing Race and Cultural Boundaries), the students emphasized the significance of mixing with different races. Two values from the top ten values that students listed for racial harmony (see Figure 1) were mentioned as the principles through which harmony can be maintained: respect and awareness. Although young people navigated diversities in their everyday actions at school, they identified a need for school to provide platforms to do so as well, as the second theme indicated in Table 1. (School Related Activities Proposed by Students). The boundaries between the themes identified from the data were rather fine. For example, “respect other races” and “involve more friends from different races” were identified as having an incentive to mix amongst other races. Despite Singapore being a multiracial society since its birth as a nation, the students mentioned that they can *start* engaging in more interracial mixing. Lee et al. [37] in their study on race relations in Singapore schools, observed how groupings at schools often occur by race and gender. Children may engage in natural encounters with friends from diverse backgrounds, but the food stalls at the school canteens, for example, are based on the division of cuisine based on their ethnic origin, i.e., Malay, Chinese, Indian, Western etc., with children again lining up based on their ethnic background. It is crucial to consider suggestions from the students in planning the curriculum, as young people start to pay better attention when they feel their opinions matter [11].



**Table 1.** Themes and subthemes for student responses on actions towards maintaining racial harmony.

Main Theme	Crossing Race and Cultural Boundaries	School-Related Activities Proposed by Students	Self-Other Relationship in Promoting Racial Harmony
Subtheme Example	<b>Making friends:</b> “I can make friends from other races.”	<b>School role and responsibility:</b> “Advise the school to have an activity on race and teach the children how to better understand and respect each other’s race and religion.”	<b>Respect:</b> “Respect each other’s race and religion and don’t judge.”
Subtheme Example	<b>Respect:</b> “Respect other races and involve more friends from other races.”	<b>Active participation:</b> “Put up posters and advertisements.”	<b>Awareness:</b> “Raise cultural awareness.”
Subtheme Example	<b>Learning:</b> “Learn each other’s cultures.”	<b>Proposing activities for schools:</b> “Celebrate events, conduct group discussions, promote history, value on diversity and stay united and make more friends from different races.”	<b>Non-racist actions:</b> “Do not make racist remarks.”
Subtheme Example	<b>Interactions:</b> “I can encourage interaction between people of all races.”		<b>Promotion of equality:</b> “Treat everyone equally.”

### 5.3. “Today There Are No Right or Wrong Answers”: Observed Learning Affordances for Intercultural Mindedness

In this section, we reflect on our observation notes from the 1.5-day event as a part of data collection and making sense of the learning experiences. We boarded the bus with the students and walked around the sites with them, making observation notes. At the end of the second day, the students had a reflection lesson in school, which we also observed. The above quote in the subheading was based on the observation notes of what one guide said to the students as an encouragement to involve them in the learning experience of the Many Races—One Nation trail (observation notes dated 15 January 2019). This specific trail consisted of different religious sites in Singapore (a mosque, a Catholic Church, a Hindu temple and a Buddhist temple). Racial harmony is, at times, referred to as racial and religious harmony, given how religious identities are aligned with racial identities in the way public holidays are instituted for certain religious festivals based on their perceived association with the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) racial categories. Although there are religious diversities within each racial category, students were at times observed to conflate religion and race, such as taking Muslims as a race. The guide’s encouragement of the students to actively participate without the need to consider whether their responses are “right” may signal the conventional learning strategies students are used to. The fear of being wrong may not be the best foundation for safe school environments, with it discouraging students from fielding questions [38]. Whether conventional methods are sufficient to support the development of critical thinking, as one of the key 21st century competencies, may need further scrutiny.

Singapore’s education system is known for its efficiency, with a substantial focus on standardized testing, seeking the “model answer” to a question, accountability and performative culture, resulting in the country’s success in international assessments [39–41]. Learning experiences such as this excursion provide the opportunity to take learning outside of the classroom, and allow students different affordances towards authentic intercultural learning. On one occasion, the learning journey provided an opportunity for peer learning. When entering the mosque, one guide tried to engage students further by asking if any Muslim student could demonstrate the rituals performed before entering

the mosque. The engagement of students as co-constructors of intercultural learning was a very good attempt, which can encourage students' ownership of their learning. In this case, a student was called out by his friends to demonstrate the rituals. The identified student appeared rather shy, but performed the procedures. This group of students was accompanied by a teacher who is also Muslim, and who was also able to guide the students. Research on cosmopolitan youths indicated that young people may find it disconcerting to advocate their own culture, for example during intercultural events [42]. On the other hand, at times students may be willing to share about their culture, and we should encourage them to be co-constructors of intercultural learning. One student was hoping to be able to conduct prayers during the visit "but she eventually didn't get to pray and was quite sad about it until the end of the trip" (observation notes dated 15 January 2019). There are no hard and fast rules for intercultural curriculums, but a student-centered implementation with the flexibility and care to include everyone equally seems the way to go.

## 6. Post-Trip Reflection to Illustrate Intercultural Learning

After two days of intercultural learning, the learning experience ended with students reflecting on their learning experiences in groups in their respective classes. Individual groups were advised to build their reflection around three main themes: (1) the religious sites and their learning experiences; (2) the Many Races—One Nation theme; and (3) the theme of what can be done to maintain harmony. The reflections were guided by three key ideas: see, think and wonder.

### 6.1. Many Races, Many Religions

This appears as an example of how students co-constructed an understanding of different religions and how the visits may help people to respect one another's religious practices.

Figure 2 illustrates an example of students actually observing how the proximity of two temples allowed people from the Sri Krishna temple to enter the Buddhist temple to see what the devotees do there. Here, the students linked the interaction between people of different religions as a sign of intercultural exchange and a possible opportunity to learn how people practice their religions. In addition, their poster mentioned the role of Muslim businesswoman Hajjah Fatimah, who commissioned the construction of a mosque named after herself, as important for women empowerment.

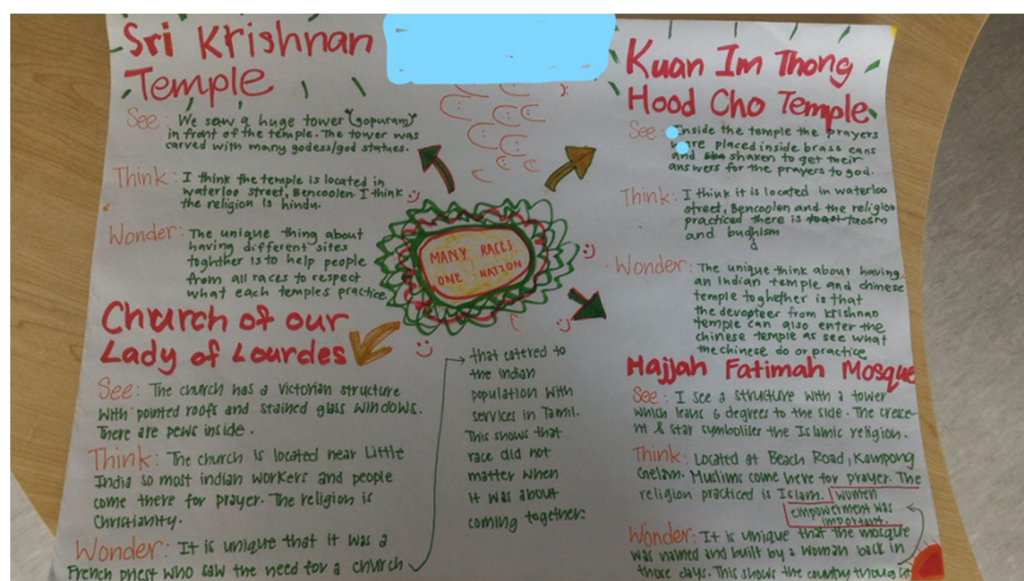


Figure 2. Poster illustrating religious diversity in Singapore.

There was variance in the level of student reflection in the posters, as demonstrated in Figures 2 and 3.

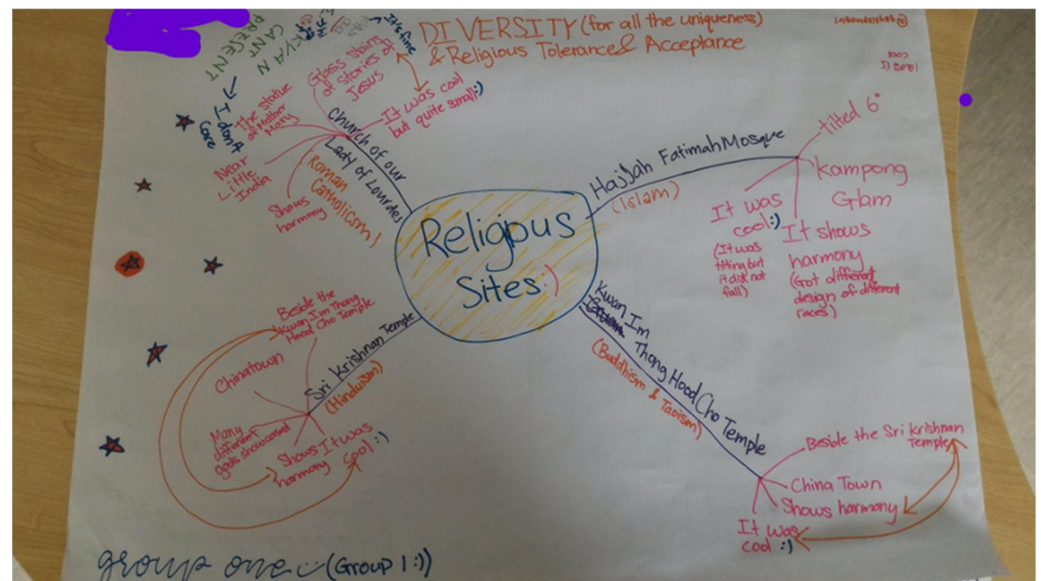


Figure 3. Poster on “Diversity (for all uniqueness)”.

Figure 3 shows another poster, which also mentioned religious tolerance and acceptance in its title. It did not illustrate the meaning of these two values, and the emphasis was on visual features such as the harmonious blending of different religious elements, but the students mistook them to be racial elements, as the poster mentioned. Such conflation of religion and race is common among the students, as mentioned earlier. The mosque was designed with a mixture of Islamic and European architectural styles, and has a minaret that resembles the spire of a church. This group focused on the physical sites and their observable architectural features and religious traditions. To further enhance the intercultural learning experience, there could be discussions facilitated that guide students to reflect more on religion and race using a deep culture approach. In unpacking the terms, it may be helpful to refer to the de-centric approach proposed by Li and Dervin [16] for the analysis of ethnic categorizations. Decentering can take place, for example, by questioning whether lived experiences align with the racial categories of CMIO.

#### 6.2. Respect Instead of Judge

In Figure 4, examples are provided to unpack “respect” and illustrate how one way of showing it is to practice other cultures and empathize with other religions. Apart from looking at differences, the students also observed similarities across religions, such as their inclination for “spreading goodness”. The students expounded on their reflection on respect in three steps: (1) what was most interesting, (2) what was learnt and (3) what can be done. It appears that some students were capable of furthering their reflection when given the platform to do so, and such learning opportunities should be provided in their daily learning.



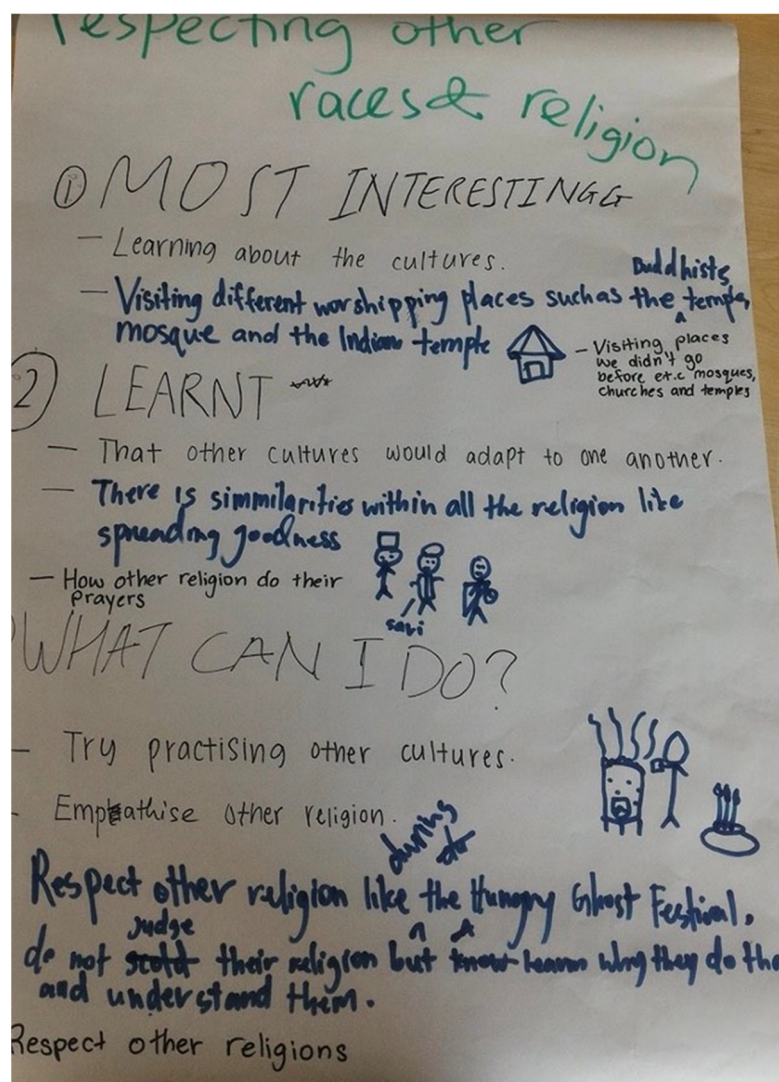


Figure 4. Poster on respect.

Figure 5 is interesting in the sense that it promotes friendship with everyone. At the same time, it advises not to take sides. "Not taking sides" may be interpreted as an attempt to be fair and equal to all parties. However, in a similar manner to respect, equality is a value that needs to be understood within the contextualization of power dynamics, and therefore is important to discuss in a safe space. This is based on the assumption that all parties in question are equitable in status. Intercultural encounters, however, often take place within unequal power relationships [13]. Due recognition of this fact is integral to intercultural learning, since the reality of everyday multiculturalism is such that not every intercultural encounter can be devoid of tension. Discussing and reflecting on the experiences of any form of bullying are thus important, instead of silencing discussion in fear of conflict. In the discourse of safe spaces, taking or not taking sides is an important topic for conversation, such as how to negotiate in a way that makes everyone feel safe and included. Such an approach to "taking sides" should be incorporated into the curriculum. Advice to think carefully when making judgements or comments to those around us is also reflected in the poster. There are also many common places mentioned where Singaporeans can facilitate intercultural interactions in Singapore, such as karaoke sessions, classes, sport facilities, playgrounds and festive occasions, as mentioned in Figure 5. It is important to note the common spaces suggested by the young people as potential sites for intercultural learning, as it is in these places where young people have an opportunity to take ownership of their own interests and mingle based on those interests.

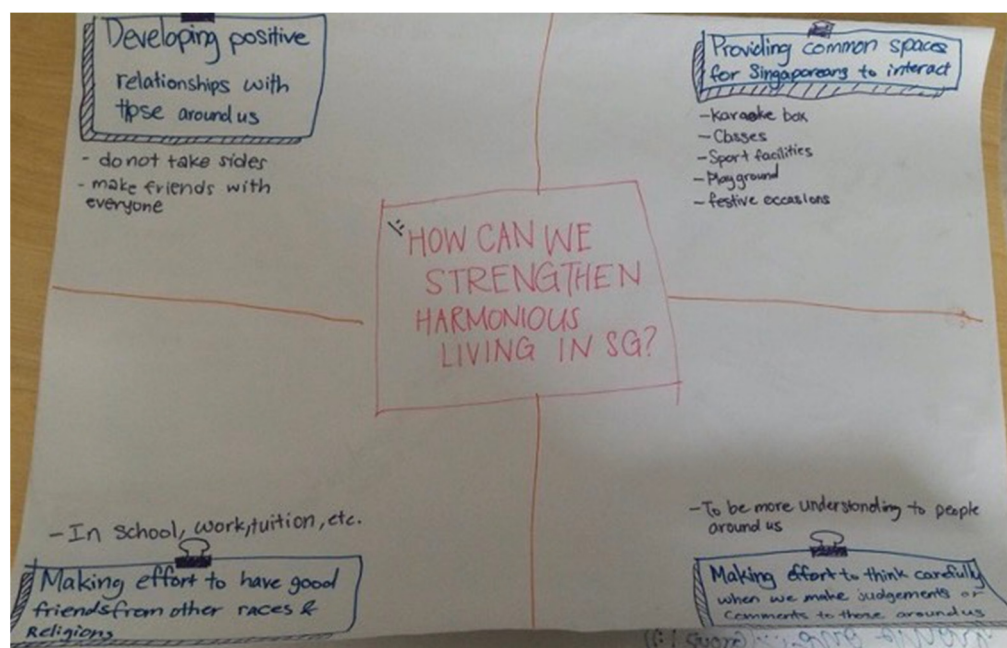


Figure 5. Proposal for strengthening harmony in Singapore.

## 7. Discussion and Practical Implications

What we can learn from this case study is that even when school provides students with an opportunity to learn about diversity in Singapore, the way a program is structured and implemented may expand or limit opportunities for students to learn how to build stronger cohesion, as well as to simply engage in dialogue between different ethnicities to prevent racial tensions. The design of the booklet and the entire learning journey could be developed further to provide open-ended questions and opportunities for students to play a more active role in their learning. With the current curriculum framework for intercultural learning, it is not surprising that students still subscribe to fixed racial categories and racialized markers of identity such as religion, as in Figure 3. This conflation of race and religion is common in other instances found in the broader study that this research is part of [19]. Since the program was outsourced, low levels of sustainability in the intercultural learning were observed among the larger study, as students reported few subsequent follow-ups from teachers. We also realized that there is a need for more intersectional discourses related to intercultural learning; therefore, we propose a curriculum framework for intercultural mindedness (see Table 2 below), adopting the values and ideas proposed by the students, as well as ideas suggested by scholars such as Pratt [13,14,18] and Li and Dervin [16]. The main objective of introducing “intercultural mindedness” is to provide a framework for students and teachers to share their own experiences (with safe space principles) to initiate opportunities for a diverse and more student-centered curriculum for intercultural learning.

Talking about racial tensions is a rather difficult and sensitive topic to discuss and teach in school settings around the world. The aim of this table is to help students unpack the values they have identified as important in relation to harmony. The values should always be re-evaluated depending on whose values are discussed. Entering the post-COVID-19 era, we need to think about creating safe spaces beyond human subjects, become interculturally minded in interactions with all living objects (and even beyond), and deliberate on how this translates in terms of the curriculum. It is evident from research that, when students feel their voices are heard and that they matter, they start to pay more attention to the world around them [6,11].



**Table 2.** Developing the intercultural mindedness framework to discuss the values and terms important for harmony, and to further analyze them based on personal experiences and understandings.

Unpacking the Current Terms Used (for Example):	Creating Safe Spaces:	Co-Constructing Intercultural Learning:
Respect, care, compassion, acceptance, tolerance, open-mindedness, sensitivity, teamwork, helpfulness, kindness, harmony, consideration, equality and any other terms proposed by the students	The terms discussed beyond the harmony framework reflecting students' experiences. What agendas are hidden behind the "beautified" pictures that one projects of one's own system/culture when it comes to diversity? [16].	Whose values? How are these values decided? How are these values acted? [16]
Race/ethnicity Religion Gender Socio-economic background (SES)	Maintaining modesty in dialogue from all those involved in comparing and complementing forms of intercultural education [16]	What do these terms mean to you? What determines your race/ethnicity and religion? How important are these to you? How do the intersections (race/religion/SES or any other identity markers) shape your privilege (if any)?
Racism Stereotyping Bullying Discrimination	Negotiating dispositions: can I see myself through the other based on similarities but also differences? [2,6,16,43] Are they individual cases or systemic in nature?	Has it happened to me? How do I feel about it? Have I witnessed it happening? How do I best react to it?

## 8. Conclusions

This paper presents an analysis of how intercultural learning is framed in an activity experienced by secondary school students in Singapore. We started off with an intention to understand the opportunities for young people to negotiate and co-construct their understanding of diversities during a school activity that contributes toward cultivating intercultural mindedness. In addition, we focused on understanding what opportunities there are for the use of safe spaces to negotiate diversities, and on what terms. The students were given an interesting opportunity to learn more about their neighborhoods and history regarding racial and religious diversity. Yet, the learning experience was unquestionably tied to given assumptions of racial and religious harmony. Unpacking harmony as it is taken for granted is crucial for rethinking intercultural learning in Singapore. Furthermore, the students' personal engagements were limited to the extent that the set program offered them opportunities to learn and explore. One example of this was the students not having opportunities to pray; in another instance, one student was asked to show an example of religious practice. However, by analyzing and working on the materials provided by this learning experience, the integration of the students' voices into the learning process can enrich future learning, and we should think about the ways of co-constructing intercultural curriculum with the learners. This could also be a way to practice modesty as proposed by Li and Dervin [16] with the learning affordances based on making sense of the learners' experiences and values.

We are aware of this study's limitations with regard to its focus on students' intercultural learning experiences from a specific activity in one school, otherwise known as the single case study framework. However, the learning journeys are offered in other schools too. We certainly do not claim that this activity represents all the activities of intercultural learning conducted by the school. The focus on this one activity is to allow a closer examination of the affordances and possible opportunities for intercultural learning of such an event. The starting point for this analysis was to understand the values that young people recognize as important for intercultural living, and the extent to which

intercultural education learning experiences are engaging and allowances are made for safe spaces for youngsters in the intercultural education framework. We did not intend to focus on the racial harmony framework, which has been discussed much by other scholars. However, racial harmony is part of the curriculum and national narrative, and therefore is an unavoidable part of the intercultural mindedness framework in the context of Singapore. Yet, the harmony framework is important, and there is space and need to further develop the curriculum around it.

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