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Negotiating identities, values, and teaching practices: five immigrant teachers in Singapore schools as potential agents of educational diversity

Peidong Yang[1] · **Lee Tat Chow**[1]

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Abstract
In a globalized world with increasing international migration and encounters of difference, education is presented with new challenges and opportunities regarding diversity, including *teacher diversity*. This paper focuses on teachers with immigrant backgrounds and explores how they potentially add constructive diversity to the receiving country's education system. The empirical setting of this paper is Singapore, an Asian city-state seldom featured in teacher diversity research. Drawing from a broader study involving online surveys and qualitative interviews, this article examines the discourses of five immigrant teachers chosen for their insightful perspectives. We found that the teachers consciously engaged their foreigner/outsider identities by drawing on their biographical and educational backgrounds; they sought to add value to aspects of the Singapore school system which they perceived to be lacking, while negotiating with dominant values and teaching practices. Their negotiations, however, remain delimited in significant ways. The paper argues that immigrant teachers represent an undertapped and underappreciated resource for greater educational diversity in Singapore and beyond.

Keywords Multicultural education · Teacher identity · Diversity · Immigration

Introduction

"Oh my god, why am I working for this Ministry?!"—"Hannah" (pseudonym) shared during our interview, recalling what went through her mind as she attended a briefing for teachers at the Singaporean Ministry of Education (MOE) on sex education. Her sentiments highlight the tensions teachers experience when their views, stemming from their individual backgrounds, differ from those of the dominant host culture. Although born in Singapore, Hannah migrated to the Middle East at an early age and spent the entirety of her pre-university education attending English-medium international schools. Raised in a Westernized educational environment, Hannah's values might be considered more "liberal" than those typically found in Singapore's mainstream school system. Although Hannah disagreed with the sex education curriculum's exclusive emphasis on sexual abstinence and heteronormativity, as a civil servant, she understood that she was not in any position to introduce her own views on such a "sensitive" topic. Thus, she opted out of teaching sex education and instead tried to leverage her educational and personal backgrounds in "safer" ways to help her students better appreciate diversity and difference.

As international migration continues to increase due to the forces of globalization, clashes between different views are increasingly frequent, presenting challenges and opportunities for educational diversity. Indeed, Schneider and Schmidt (2016) went as far as claiming that "[s]chools today are confronted with a historically unprecedented level of linguistic, cultural, and social diversity" (p. xii). As illustrated in the above anecdote involving Hannah, one dimension of diversity is *teacher diversity* and its educational implications. Compared to more prominent themes, such as student diversity and multicultural curriculum, however, the topic of teacher diversity—especially in connection with immigrant teachers—has received relatively less scholarly attention. Although this may be changing, as educational research in major immigration destination countries has acknowledged this demographic (e.g., Niyubahwe et al., 2013) and appears to be growing (e.g., Bense, 2016; Schmidt & Schneider,

✉ Peidong Yang
Peidong.yang@nie.edu.sg

[1] National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616, Singapore

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2016), the extant literature on immigrant teachers tends to focus on their professional challenges, obstacles, or otherwise negative experiences. However, immigrant teachers' unique strengths and contributions have only been explored in limited ways. As a result, there is an agreement among scholars that immigrant teachers and their experiences have remained an undervalued resource by the schools and education systems where they work (Georgi, 2016; Ross & Ahmed, 2016; Schneider & Lang, 2016).

To better understand the potential contribution of immigrant teachers, this article focuses on the experiences and narratives of five teachers in mainstream secondary schools in the Asian city state of Singapore. Despite being a country of immense sociocultural diversity and a major migration destination, Singapore has rarely featured in research on diversity education, multicultural education, and teacher diversity. Meanwhile, Singapore's self-conscious positioning as a society of "Asian" political and sociocultural values (Chua, 2018) contrasts notably with immigrant-settling countries that predominate in the existing literature, which tend to be Western liberal democracies. Thus, it may be asked whether the experience of immigrant teachers in Singapore differs from immigrant teachers in other settings. Examining the perspectives of immigrant teachers in Singaporean schools not only opens a new empirical vista, arguably it also offers a fresh lens for viewing teacher diversity and its educational implications.

In what follows, we first offer a review of existing Anglophone literature on immigrant teachers, identifying key themes and several gaps that this paper addresses. A background section follows, covering the Singaporean context with reference to education. Then, a brief account of the empirical study is presented, including methodology, data, and some broad findings. Drawing on in-depth interviews with five immigrant teachers, the main findings section then unfolds along the themes of how these teachers negotiated *identities*, *values*, and *teaching practices* in the context of their work. The paper concludes with new insights into this Singapore-based study that help us better appreciate the significance of immigrant teachers and teacher diversity more broadly.

Immigrant teachers: challenges, contributions, and gaps

In major immigrant-receiving countries in the Anglophone West, educational scholarship has long acknowledged teachers of migrant backgrounds as a worthwhile subject of research (e.g., Bascia, 1996; Niyubahwe et al., 2013; Phillion, 2003). More lately, this literature has expanded (see Bense, 2016 for a review) to the European context (Colliander, 2020; Ennerberg & Economou, 2021; Liu et al., 2019; Schmidt & Schneider, 2016). Despite this growing interest, there is an enduring tendency for scholars to focus on the negative aspects of immigrant teachers' experiences, including professional and sociocultural difficulties. In earlier research, this "problem-centric" perspective manifested in highlighting the perceived "lack" and "shortfalls" of immigrant teachers (e.g., Peeler & Jane, 2005, p. 325). Alternatively, researchers pointed to the institutional barriers (particularly regarding credentialing) and systemic discrimination that immigrant teachers faced (Beynon et al., 2004; Myles et al., 2006; Schmidt, 2010). Although recent scholarship has critiqued and consciously moved away from constructing immigrant teachers as somehow "deficient" (Cho, 2016, p. 48; Marom & Ilieva, 2016, p. 25), research in this field remains overly focused on problems and issues. Thus, a more balanced approach with a more positive and constructive framing is called for.

The unique strengths and contributions of immigrant teachers have been acknowledged by previous research, but only in limited ways. For example, existing studies commonly find that teachers of immigrant backgrounds—and of minority ethnic/cultural backgrounds more generally—tend to have an advantage in teaching students of similar backgrounds because they act as "role models," "bridges," and cultural "translators" (Colliander, 2020; Georgi, 2016; Santoro, 2016; Schmidt & Janusch, 2016; Oliveira & Kentor, 2023). Immigrant teachers are also found to emphasize their unique cultural and linguistic capital—especially native language expertise—to legitimate themselves and their value-added to the host-country education system (Georgi, 2016; Putjata, 2019; Schneider & Lang, 2016). But are immigrant teachers' value and contributions confined mainly to the education of minority/immigrant students or to the teaching of niche subjects? Santoro (2016), who has researched culturally and linguistically diverse teachers in Scotland, answers in the negative, maintaining that "[t]eachers who are bicultural and bilingual can potentially contribute different cultural perspectives to curriculum and teach *all* pupils about and through cultural perspectives that are unavailable to teachers from the hegemonic mainstream" (p. 11; emphasis original). However, exactly how immigrant teachers' contributions go beyond minority/immigrant students or niche subjects necessarily vary from context to context and remain to be studied empirically.

Despite some recognition of immigrant teachers' strengths and contributions in existing research, scholars (e.g., Cho, 2016; Georgi, 2016; Schneider & Lang, 2016) continue to hold that these teachers and the assets they bring or embody remain underappreciated. To wit, Georgi (2016, p. 69) writes "the diverse migration-specific experiences and the culturally specific knowledge that teachers with migration background can bring to their students are not yet being interpreted and used as a valuable institutional resource."

Teacher identity is another theme that commonly appears in immigrant teacher scholarship (Colliander, 2020; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Ennerberg & Economou, 2021), but there are also research gaps. Referring to "how teachers develop a 'teaching self,' in the context of concrete details of biography, school settings, relationship, and educational systems within which teachers work" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004, p. 387), teacher identity has been a well-established theme in educational studies in general (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). For the most part, however, discussions of identity have been of *professional* identity (Beijaard et al., 2000; Sachs, 2005), as aptly illustrated in Beijaard et al.'s (2000) unpacking of teacher identity in terms of "the ways they [i.e., teachers] see themselves as subject matter experts, pedagogical experts, and didactical experts" (p. 751). While this emphasis on professional identity is justifiable given that much of the teacher identity research is geared toward teacher education and professional development, other critical identity facets (such as migrant status, nationality, gender, etc.) are less explored in teacher diversity research. Thus, there is merit in adopting a more expansive scope of identities when researching teacher diversity. In the case of immigrant teachers, this entails focusing on the teachers' *im/migrant*[1] *identities*—namely, ways in which they position themselves as im/migrants in the host country and how they make sense of their positioning in relation to their professional role. By doing so, fresh insights into teacher diversity's impact on migration/mobility in the host-country education system may emerge.

Building on these gaps in scholarship, the next section provides a context to the study—Singapore and its educational setting—and the empirical study underpinning this paper. It also discusses relevant findings from the broader study as well as the rationale for featuring five specific teachers in the paper's main qualitative findings section.

Background: the Singapore context

Thanks to its history and role in today's global economy, the Southeast Asian city state of Singapore is a country of immense diversity and a major migration hub in the Asia–Pacific region. As of mid-2021, Singapore had a total population of 5.45 million, 36% of whom were noncitizens (Prime Minister's Office, 2021). Following British colonial legacy, Singapore's ethnoculturally diverse population is broadly categorized into four major "racial" groups: Chinese (76%), Malay (15%), Indian (7.5%), and "other" (1.5%)—a model known as *"CMIO" multiracialism*, which remains the cornerstone of the state's governance of societal diversity. One key implication of the CIMO multiracial system for education is that, in state schools, students are required to learn their respective ethnic "mother-tongue" (MT) languages as a mandatory subject in addition to the *lingua franca* of English. The three main MT languages taught in Singapore schools are Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil, which also means that there is a significant need in the education system for MT language teachers. Also relevant is that education in Singapore has been persistently characterized as assessment driven and focused on high-stakes exams (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). In addition, the officially approved values and sociopolitical worldviews in Singapore schools are "Asian" or non-Western (Gopinathan, 2007), in line with Singapore's broader political system and climate (Chua, 2018).

Research into teacher diversity in Singapore, especially immigration-related diversity, has remained relatively underdeveloped (Yang, 2022; Yang & Chow, 2019). One likely reason for this is that, despite the ethnocultural diversity of Singapore and its population, migrant-background teachers represent only a minuscule proportion of the teaching workforce. In 2011, it was reported that there were fewer than 620 "international teachers" in Singapore schools, accounting for less than 2% of the entire teacher population (Ng, 2011). A decade later, this had fallen to less than 1% or approximately 300 teachers with an international profile (Ong, 2021). It ought to be noted though that these reported figures likely excluded immigrant teachers with naturalized Singaporean citizenship, thus the actual number of immigrant-background teachers is probably higher. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that the level of teacher diversity resulting from migration is rather low in Singapore schools. However, this does not imply that immigrant teachers are less significant to local education or less worthy of research. On the contrary, with a chorus of international scholars arguing for diversifying the teacher profession (e.g., Schmidt & Schneider, 2016), the lack of immigrant teachers and research on this topic in Singapore justify investigations into these teachers' experiences and perspectives.

The study: data, sampling, and analysis

This study derives from a research project on immigrant teachers in Singapore schools led by the first author between 2017 and 2019. The project's broad research objectives were to explore the migratory and professional *trajectories*, *identities*, and *integration* of immigrant teachers in Singapore schools. An "immigrant teacher" was defined as someone born and/or raised outside Singapore, not locally educated

[1] The spelling of "im/migrant" here signifies an inclusive concept of migrant teachers irrespective if they are long-term settler in the host country. In the rest of the paper, all three expressions—"im/migrant," "migrant," "immigrant"—are used.

for their primary and secondary education (K-12 stage), and currently working as a teacher in a mainstream[2] Singapore primary or secondary school, irrespective of their citizenship status. Thus, Singapore citizens who received their primary and secondary education outside of Singapore are also considered to have an immigrant background in this study. Data collection took place using an online survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews with volunteers drawn from the pool of survey respondents.

The survey sought to obtain a description of the presence of immigrant teachers in Singapore (in the absence of official data) and was disseminated by contacting the administrators of all primary and secondary schools in the country, which eventually returned 144 valid responses. Although this was not a probabilistic sampling procedure, there was no reason to suggest any major sample bias. Thus, with some caution, the survey findings can be used to make basic inferences about the immigrant teacher population. For qualitative data, one-to-one interviews with 23 participants were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed *ad verbatim* for coding and analysis. The analysis of interview data was driven by the study's research objectives and questions and guided by the "grounded theory" approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1968), in which conceptual and theoretical insights were constructed based on the themes and categories emerging from the data. The coding process began with what Corbin and Strauss (2015) called "*open coding,*" where themes and categories were identified (often, in vivo codes); initial codes were then further refined, sorted, and organized in light of the study's research objectives and conceptual frameworks.

In terms of the overall picture of immigrant teachers in Singapore schools, our survey found that the top two sources of immigrant teachers were China (mainland) ($n = 65$; 45.5% of the survey sample) and Malaysia ($n = 52$; 36.4%), accounting for every four in five teachers in the sample. Moreover, nearly 80% of the survey respondents were MT language teachers: close to 97% ($n = 63$) of teachers from China were MT teachers, whereas 73% of Malaysians (all of whom were ethnically Chinese) taught MT (Chinese). Just over half of the respondents from India—the third most populous nationality in the sample ($n = 17$; 11.9%)—were MT teachers. These numbers suggest that immigrant teachers in Singapore schools are primarily tapped for their linguistic skills in language teaching. Altogether, 23 immigrant teachers (female = 16; male = 7; China-background = 7; Malaysia-background = 7; India-background = 5; other backgrounds = 4) from the survey sample participated in one-on-one interviews. Nineteen were interviewed twice, and the remaining four once each. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h. Because virtually all Chinese and Malaysian teachers taught MT, their interviews focused on their roles as language teachers. While they considered their main strength and contribution to be their native Chinese language capability, they also highlighted their weaker command of the English language as a professional obstacle. The general tenor of the interviews with these MT teachers, thus, somewhat echoes the existing literature's tendency to focus on problems. In the case of the Indian immigrant teachers, most taught Humanities subjects (History and Social studies) and largely perceived their integration into the Singapore education system to be smooth, save for certain administrative or logistical challenges. Most notably, with the exception of Ajay whom we discuss in this paper, these Indian-background teachers perceived their value to be well aligned with that of Singapore's education system.

As stated earlier, this paper explores immigrant teachers' contributions beyond those commonly acknowledged in current scholarship. Thus, to the authors, focusing on non-MT immigrant teachers represents a more productive direction of inquiry. Of them ($n = 30$), a diverse collection of countries/territories of origin/upbringing were represented, including New Zealand, Canada, Japan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Hong Kong. These teachers also taught various subjects, including English Literature, the Sciences, Social studies, and History. Interview data affirms the non-MT teachers as a fertile source for insights that address this paper's objectives. The interviews revealed more contestations, negotiations, and productive tensions, often stemming from the interviewees' more "unusual" biographical and educational backgrounds (such as in the case of Hannah at the beginning of the paper).

Thus, we selected five immigrant teachers from the non-MT group whose migration trajectories were more varied and unconventional compared to the MT-teaching majority. Since our findings center on these five individuals, we first offer brief biographic sketches of each teacher (using pseudonyms) to highlight their distinctive life and career trajectories, and the diversities that they embody. We then present findings along two subheadings: (1) how these teachers' discourses about migrant identities interacted with their perceptions of and negotiations with certain values embedded in Singaporean society and education system and (2) how they drew on their backgrounds and experiences to adopt certain approaches and practices in their teaching. In exploring these two themes, we aim to illustrate the extent and manners in which immigrant teachers can potentially

[2] Mainstream school includes government schools, government-aided schools and autonomous schools. All mainstream schools follow the national syllabus set by the MOE, differing only in the range of additional programs they offer insofar as they do not interfere with the core syllabus. Thus, international schools, religious, and other specialized schools, which do not follow the national syllabus, were excluded from the study

act as agents of constructive educational diversity in their receiving context.

Findings: negotiating identities, values, and teaching practices

Five immigrant teacher profiles

Name	Country of birth	Age	Citizenship status	Teaching experience in SG School	Subject area
Hannah	Singapore (migrated to and raised in UAE since 5 years old)	30	Singapore citizen	2.5	Nutritional Science
Naomi	Japan (moved between Malaysia and Singapore since 6 years old)	28	Work pass	3.5	English and Literature
John	New Zealand	32	Permanent resident	8.5	Mathematics
Cedric	Poland	36	Permanent resident	10	History and Social studies
Ajay	India	32	Work pass	6	English and Literature

"Hannah"

While Hannah was born in Singapore to a Malay–Chinese-mixed marriage, she left the country at age five and was raised entirely in a cosmopolitan city in the Middle East, attending English-medium international schools throughout her pre-university education. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in Dietetics from a university in Melbourne, Hannah worked for a year in Australia before returning to Singapore at the age of 27 to embark on her teaching career in a government secondary school.

"Naomi"

Born in Japan, Naomi's migration journey began at the age of six. She moved several times between Malaysia and Singapore, each time staying for only two to three years because of her father's work postings. Having attended mostly English-medium international schools in Singapore and a Japanese school in Malaysia for her pre-university education, Naomi earned her bachelor's degree in a Humanities discipline from the National University of Singapore.

"John"

Born in New Zealand to Caucasian and Chinese-mixed parentage, John spent his formative years up to university in New Zealand. He then completed a bachelor's degree in Mathematics with a scholarship at the National University of Singapore. Although presented with the opportunity to work in research in New Zealand, John chose to remain in Singapore to pursue a teaching career, partly drawn to the prospect of living independently from his family. Having attained Permanent Resident (PR) status for 3.5 years at the time of our research, John shared that he did not plan to seek Singapore citizenship, as his roots were still in New Zealand.

"Cedric"

Originally born in Poland, Cedric moved to Germany and then Canada with his parents at an early age as refugees. Holding dual Polish and Canadian citizenship, Cedric received his entire education in Canada, completing a bachelor's degree in History and Geography and a second degree in Education. Following that, Cedric moved to England to teach for two years as a science teacher before leaving in search of teaching opportunities more aligned with his undergraduate education. This led Cedric to Singapore, first as a contract-term teacher, a position that eventually became permanent after he secured PR status.

"Ajay"

Ajay was born and raised in India where he completed his education up to a Master's degree in Literature. Pursuing his dream to be a teacher, Ajay then spent six months teaching in a rural school. However, dissatisfied with what he saw as inconducive teaching environment in India, Ajay began looking for opportunities to teach abroad. Through what he called "a stroke of luck," Ajay chanced upon a recruitment drive by Singapore's MOE in India in 2011 and successfully applied to become a teacher in Singapore, subsequently being hired as an English and Literature teacher. At the time of our interview, he had twice applied for PR without success.

Theme 1: Migrant identities and value tensions/ negotiations

A common theme among these teachers was an awareness of the tensions between their migrant identities and their professional expectations, manifested through their values. As civil servants, teachers in Singapore are expected to serve as role models for the country's national value system, transmitting values sanctioned by the education system. Yet, hailing from backgrounds that diverged from Singapore in values, norms, and culture, they sometimes experienced dissonance and tension in the course of their work. This section examines the ways in which the five teachers discoursed and positioned their immigrant identities and how such discourse and positioning caused them to reflect on and negotiate with local values.

Among the teachers interviewed, John perceived his immigrant identity as a New Zealander most overtly when discussing his identity. While John maintained his "love" for Singapore and his desire to give back to the host society, he admitted that there was "still a very clear number one and number two" in terms of his core identity. He remarked plainly: "I'm not Singaporean. I just know it, you know? It's not who I am."

John's strong awareness of his identity as a New Zealander was partly attributable to a sense of distance he often felt when interacting with local colleagues, stemming from their differences in matters such as the use of English colloquialisms and cultural interests. John recalls his tendency to, at times, "exclude" himself from conversations with local colleagues, despite sharing a collegial relation with them, so as not to "impose" his unfamiliarity with local culture on them. However, John's immigrant identity extended beyond day-to-day interactions into the realm of social values and beliefs with potential implications for education. John remarked on what he called his "egalitarian streak," which he attributed to New Zealand's "flat society," as a point of contention in his understanding of Singapore's meritocracy. As John elaborated.

> Every nationality has its own cultural blind spots. I suspect meritocracy is one of Singapore's, although people are becoming more aware of it now. And [me] bringing a separate set of values, it's interesting to see where *I run up against the local values*. … I would not seek to impose what I'm doing, I'm not Singaporean, but just to highlight "*Hey you may think this is a universal value, it is not, it's not something that everyone agrees to, it's not something that's necessarily apparently right*'.

As seen here, John's identification with New Zealand society and what he considered one of its values—egalitarianism—put him in palpable tension with a core value—indeed ideology—of the host society, namely meritocracy, which the Singaporean education system is supposedly predicated on and serves to reproduce (Lim & Tan, 2020). Moreover, John's discourse displayed a certain posture of dialogue and negotiation with his host setting, suggesting a degree of voice and agency.

A similarly conscious attempt to carve out a distinct identity can be observed when Cedric emphasized his roots as an inalienable part of his identity. Probed about his intention to obtain Singapore citizenship (which would require him to renounce his Polish and Canadian dual citizenship), Cedric expressed his willingness to renounce his Polish citizenship, replying pragmatically in terms of his livelihood and career in Singapore. As he put it, he had "more eggs in the basket in Singapore than Poland." However, Cedric refused to obtain Singapore citizenship if it meant renouncing his Canadian passport, tying it to his core identity and declaring, "…my Canadian citizenship is just part of who I am, and I have my identity and I would just never give up my Canadian citizenship for myself or for my boys."

Delineating a clear boundary around his immigrant identity, Cedric similarly pointed to a difference in values with those of the host country:

> [In Singapore] you have different cultural values. If you compare my values, I'd probably be more *liberal* in some perspectives than let's say Singapore's? …I mean *it's not a clash*, but there's [*sic*] some things that I have a difference in opinion on. …but I guess, you look at it as kind of like a source of, you know, *positive*, *something different you bring to the table*.

In this case, by stating "it's not a clash", Cedric downplayed the potential tension, but characterized the divergence in value as a "positive"—a valuable source of diversity. In other words, Cedric saw his "liberalness" stemming from his Western background as adding constructive diversity to the local "Asian" and less "liberal" (in his view) value system in Singapore.

Compared with John and Cedric, whose immigrant identities were anchored in their roots in two Anglophone societies, Hannah's and Naomi's characterizations of their migrant identities took on a more footloose "cosmopolitan" character, as both spent their formative years traversing and growing up in different countries and environments and attending international schools along the way.

Despite having been born in Singapore, which technically made her a "Singaporean," Hannah was honest about her lack of real connection with the country, seeing her identity instead in international terms, as that of a "third culture kid." Hannah reiterated her "pride" as a third culture kid, which involved "holding on to what you know and what you feel is your identity, that you refuse to let anyone tell you otherwise…" She admitted that even after having taught in

Singapore for 2.5 years, she still retained an identity that set her apart from her local counterparts, stating there were "… still little bits [about me] here and there that… people would look [and say] '*Not Singaporean, clearly not Singaporean*".

Hannah's identification as a "third culture kid" and her corresponding lack of identification with Singapore had implications for teaching values, since, according to official policy of the Singaporean MOE, "every teacher is a Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) teacher." To illustrate this, Hannah recounted her sense of disconnect upon the occasion of the demise of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, in 2015. She failed to share the wave of patriotic sentiments his passing evoked among Singaporeans, as she frankly disclosed. This dissonance was palpable when Hannah attempted to fulfill her professional role, as part of CCE, to instill patriotic values in her students:

> In terms of the sense of belonging…to Singapore and protecting the…nation, I don't think [I] feel that way? …I am proud to be Singaporean… But…I don't have that kind of connection…I can understand it on a national level, what he [Lee Kuan Yew] did and putting Singapore on the map and all. But [I have never lived here]…I didn't get to experience that. So, when it comes to National Education, I struggle when I had to teach it. And to convince my kids to…feel this sense of identity [was challenging] when I myself am kind of halfway here, halfway there.

Notably, Hannah did not see this disconnect as a hindrance or a professional handicap, but regarded her not sharing core local values and sentiments as facts that confirmed her identity as a migrant and "outsider," much like in the case of John and Cedric. If anything, Hannah held on to the worldviews and values that made her who she was and even critiqued locally entrenched values and ideologies that she disagreed with (albeit in the safe space of our research interview), as illustrated in her "rant" about Singapore's sex education curriculum at the beginning of this paper.

Naomi had a similar background as Hannah's, with Asian parentage coupled with a Westernized international upbringing. During the interviews, she talked about her identity transition from being "bothered" by her status as an immigrant who "didn't really belong" to someone who embraced her transient and flexible identity. Reflecting on her identity and belonging, Naomi shared "…home is nowhere and everywhere to me… [Even though] it's kind of like *I don't really have roots*, it's also this *flexibility*: now I can go anywhere and make it my home"—a statement that unwittingly evokes a widely used definition of cultural cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 2006).

Naomi believed her experience interacting with diverse "people from so many different groups" that sometimes involved "political tensions and religious tensions" afforded her an advantage in facilitating discussions with students about "contentious issues," particularly those that went against the grain of the *status quo* in Singapore. As Naomi elaborated.

> I think that's something that I am good or maybe even better, perhaps, at doing than my non-migrant counterparts…getting the students to consider lots of different sides to the argument…that sort of mediation I think is something that I'm good at and, yes, *my personal opinions may conflict with the Singapore government's opinions*, on what is okay and what is not okay, but I think as a teacher, I am able to get the students to sort of think about it from all the different perspectives.

Similar to the other teachers examined earlier, Naomi was also very much aware that her migrant identity and highly cosmopolitan life trajectory had shaped her such that her opinions on some contentious issues might conflict with the values and positions officially sanctioned by the Singapore state. Echoing Cedric, Naomi saw this tension between her identity and the host society value as constructive, conferring an edge in her professional work as a Humanities teacher.

Of the five teachers, Ajay arguably took the softest tone about his migrant identity, due partly to an acknowledgment that India is a developing country that he felt had to learn humbly from a more advanced country like Singapore, not least because of the latter's renowned education system. Ajay also saw Singapore as a desirable place to settle down; hence, his multiple attempts to apply for PR. Furthermore, acutely aware of the prejudice in Singapore society against people of Indian ethnicity/nationality, Ajay kept a low profile about his immigrant identity, remarking that "…some of my students they don't even know that I'm a foreigner," although whenever the topic of India arose in his teaching, he would still draw on his native knowledge to benefit the students. Yet, when asked about values, Ajay remarked on the difference between his own background and his current host context, characterizing his upbringing in India as one based on "liberal-moderate values," whereas Singapore's culture was "conservative." In fact, just like Hannah, Ajay revealed in our interview his disagreement with the official silence and implicit denial of minority sexualities in Singapore's sex education curriculum.

Taken together, the above findings illustrate that the discourses of the five teachers on their immigrant identities are closely related with how their values diverge from Singapore's and how such divergence is negotiated in the context of education. Remarkably, all five teachers alluded to their comparatively more "liberal" values than those in Singapore's society and education system. Importantly, instead of viewing their greater "liberalness" as being incompatible, they adopted a constructive view of their difference as

bringing valuable diversity to local education. Indeed, as the next section shows, these teachers subtly channeled their immigrant identities and values into their *teaching practices* in ways they believed benefited students.

Theme 2: Negotiating teaching practices

A common theme from the interviews was how so-called "sensitive issues"—delicate matters believed to potentially jeopardize social harmony and stability in Singapore such as race, religion, class, sexuality—should be handled by teachers and discussed with students. Confirming existing scholarship (Baildon & Sim, 2009), all five immigrant teachers noted their local colleagues' general discomfort and avoidance toward discussing such topics in the classroom—an approach that Hannah, Naomi, and Ajay dubbed "sweeping…" or "keeping things under the rug." Disagreeing with this approach, some of these immigrant teachers found subtle ways to introduce conversations about sensitive topics to their students, while taking care not to raise too much alarm.

Naomi and Ajay, for instance, leveraged their roles as English and Literature teachers to use the literature class to cautiously expose students to some sensitive topics. Naomi shared that she used to assign literary texts containing feminist and LGBT themes for her students to explore. Believing that she had benefited from a "global-mindedness" through her education in international schools, Naomi wanted her Singaporean students to be similarly exposed to cosmopolitan perspectives at an early age. As she elaborated.

> I guess it comes down to…exposing students to more diverse texts, talking to students about topics that aren't considered very comfortable within the Singapore context…things like race and religion… I would also add things, like gender and sexuality, and I think those are things that I think is important to talk to students about, because perhaps I'm *a bit more globally minded than my colleagues*? Whereas my [local] colleagues are more focused on…the Singapore context, they're more grounded in that sense, [thinking] we may actually also be putting ourselves at risk by introducing some of these topics…

Naomi retrospectively attributed her "global mindedness" to her experiences in international schools, where her teachers were "always bringing dangerous things to the table" and "discussion about things that we don't always feel comfortable talking about was *encouraged.*" This practice was maintained despite the demographically diverse student population, where students from different backgrounds often came into political conflict. Naomi recalled her teachers creating "a very safe environment" for discussions, which she saw as "a really good thing." While being cautious not to overstate her beliefs, Naomi observed that the Singapore education environment took a much different approach; when it came to contentious or sensitive issues, the general sentiment was to "let's sweep it under the rug."

For Ajay, who knew that it could be controversial for a foreigner like him to comment on touchy issues in Singapore, he realized that examples from India—a country of immense societal diversity and tension—could be an appropriate and "safer" way to get students to think and talk about sensitive issues. He shared.

> Like when I teach Singapore [literature], […] the students love reading *angsty* stuff. […] For example, when you talk about *race*, when you talk about *religion*…anything about *discrimination*, students love to read. So, I can bring in another perspective from my Indian [background]… [showing to them] it's not *only* in this country that you see this kind of thing or mentality... So that does help me to bring in another perspective. Again, they are very fascinated by some of the stories that I share with them…

Another way in which the immigrant teachers' unique backgrounds shaped their teaching practice had to do with their lived experiences overseas: embodied first-hand experiences sometimes made their teaching on certain topics more authentic. According to Cedric, the History and Social studies teacher, his lessons about different countries and societal systems were more convincing and relatable:

> I also bring to the table my understanding of, you know, differences in systems. I mean, teachers [in Singapore] could also…learn about European history [in university]. But it's different than maybe when you *grew up* in Canada, you spent time living in England, so you just, you've experienced living and working in different countries, you've experienced their education systems, so I think you can kind of bring that in? Especially for subjects like history and social studies, you can just *make a lot more connections*, and I find that helps make this subject relevant to kids; *they can see that*.

As seen here, while not intending to put local teachers down, Cedric considered his lived experiences in various Western countries a pedagogic advantage that could benefit his students. Ajay made a similar point, he talked about having lived through "a real terrorist attack" in his own hometown, which he often used as a talking point with students to enliven learning about "Total Defence Day," an annual occasion in Singapore dedicated to the role citizens play in safeguarding the nation.

While Ajay, Cedric, and Naomi enjoyed the advantage of using their respective teaching subjects as platforms to meaningfully channel their identities, John and Hannah's circumstances were different as Mathematics and Nutritional

Science teachers, respectively. However, this did not prevent them from finding other ways to tweak their teaching approaches and/or practices to benefit their students, heuristically motivated by their backgrounds and values.

In John's case, while he was not able to meaningfully channel his migrant identity through Mathematics, he did so in his capacity as an extracurricular teacher. Overseeing the school's debate team, John followed his "egalitarian streak" and insisted on giving all students equal opportunities in coaching, regardless of their abilities, despite meritocracy's prescription of giving more opportunities to accomplished students. John's is a clear example of how his identity and values shaped his approach and practice in education, even if this mainly pertained to an extracurricular activity. Moreover, John believed that his more "egalitarian" way of doing things was appreciated by his students, observing:

> [The students] actually…recognize that it's a good thing, because they see their friends doing well, they see their friends having a chance and they see their friends growing. So, you talk about meritocracy still, you can still talk about, you know, the people who deserve it will get the place at the end of the day, the big big competitions, but until then, *I'm going to hold the strongest I can to this idea of egalitarianism*, that *everyone* should have a chance and *everyone* gets time with the coach, with me, to improve, *everyone* gets feedback, *I don't treat you differently just because you're better or worse*, you all get quality instruction.

With Hannah, although the Nutrition Science class did not provide a ready platform for her to express her immigrant identities and values, Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), which all teachers are involved in, did create such a space. Drawing on her cosmopolitan upbringing, Hannah contended that the broadness of her exposure to different cultures and peoples gave her more confidence in managing and negotiating cultural diversity and difference. She remarked, "I have met so many different people… I have a lot of experiences, a lot of stories…things you can pull from to help these students." Hannah shared that she used to take her students to forum theaters where improvisation actors played out situations of discrimination, value conflicts, and other scenarios relevant to CCE. Hannah argued that learning about character and values this way was much more effective and engaging than the traditional didactic approach adopted in Singapore classrooms. Hannah also noted that CCE and education about values should focus more on "showing" rather than just "telling." With no intention of writing off her local colleagues, Hannah maintained that meeting all sorts of people in different countries during her migratory journeys had given her an edge in helping students understand, appreciate, and manage diversity and difference more authentically.

Thus, in manners as described above, all five immigrant teachers found *some* ways to express aspects of their immigrant identities and divergent values in their everyday teaching. Their actions were not necessarily against the *status quo*, but supplemented it. Even when their actions were in tension or at odds with dominant values and practices in Singapore schools, their efforts are better described as subtle and selective *negotiations*, not amounting to subversive moves. It is important to remember that, within Singapore's highly centralized education system and civil service structure, the space for departure from official guidelines and dominant practices is ultimately very limited. Thus, teachers must always remain pragmatic even if they wish to "push the envelope" slightly. Naomi, for example, admitted that she was nervous about introducing "sensitive" literature to her students and, thus, kept a low profile about it. This was very much the case for the four other teachers as well. In summary, when these five immigrant teachers drew on their respective backgrounds to negotiate teaching approaches and practices, they largely did so on the fringes, in *ad hoc* and modest ways.

Discussion and conclusion

To summarize, in this paper, we have highlighted five immigrant teachers in the Singapore secondary school setting, exploring their discourse of identities, reflections on value differences, and negotiations of teaching practices. We found that these five teachers largely maintained their foreigner/outsider identities while leveraging their biographical and educational backgrounds to add more diversity to students' educational experience. They did so by negotiating cautiously with certain *status quo* values (for example, about sex education and meritocracy) in the Singapore system and by constructively tweaking or supplementing prevailing teaching practices based on their own values, such as those pertaining to "liberalness," "global-mindedness," and "egalitarianism."

The five immigrant teachers embodied "nonmainstream" biographic characteristics, in the sense that they were neither *Chinese* (in nationality/ethnicity) nor *Mother-Tongue (MT) language teachers*—the two categories that make up the vast majority of immigrant-background teachers in K-12 education in Singapore. Instead, of these five teachers, four had quite complex migration trajectories with highly internationalized upbringings, whereas the remaining one (Ajay from India) came from an extremely culturally and ethnically diverse society and had an Anglophone education thanks to his specialization in English literature. All fluent or native in English and familiar with Anglophone cultures, these five teachers formed a distinct contrast with the other immigrant teachers in our study's sample. Focusing on this

small cohort of nonmainstream immigrant teachers allowed us to avoid rehashing some common findings from existing scholarship about migrant teachers, such as that these teachers tend to legitimate their place by stressing their niche language expertise (Georgi, 2016; Putjata, 2019; Schneider & Lang, 2016) or that migrant teachers often serve as role models or bridge-builders for minority/immigrant students with whom they share ethnic/linguistic/cultural backgrounds (Colliander, 2020; Georgi, 2016; Santoro, 2016; Schmidt & Janusch, 2016). This has aided our attempt to go beyond existing scholarship on immigrant teachers.

This paper has contributed to existing research in at least three ways. Firstly, as we argued in the literature review, current scholarship tends to focus on the negative aspects of immigrant teachers' experiences, emphasizing challenges and obstacles—professional or otherwise. In contrast, our paper took a more constructive framing, highlighting the *negotiative agency* of immigrant teachers and their unique contributions to the host education system. This is not to suggest that immigrant teachers in our study did not encounter challenges or limitations; indeed, as we have acknowledged, they all had to contend with certain boundaries and limits set by their professional identity and their status as civil servants in Singapore. Nevertheless, they were confident that their backgrounds and experiences afforded them unique advantages in broadening the horizon of their students' education.

One factor that contributed to this constructive framing was our focus on the immigrant identity-related discourse and narratives of these teachers, which constitutes a second way in which this paper went beyond extant scholarship. As we established earlier, while teachers' professional identities have been extensively researched, scholars have less often investigated the intersections between teachers' migrant identities and their development of teaching selves. By giving detailed attention to how our research participants discoursed their immigrant biographies and belongingness, we were able to show how values/beliefs were closely intertwined with migrant identities and how both eventually influenced their teaching approaches and practices.

Thirdly, our paper provided a unique focus on immigrant teachers with internationalized or Westernized backgrounds in an Asian destination. This is contrary to most current research on migrant teachers. Since most existing studies are concerned with non-Western migrant teachers working and integrating into education systems in Western liberal democracies, migrant teachers typically had to grapple with and adapt to host societies' supposedly more "Western," "liberal," and "individualistic" values and pedagogies. The situation in our paper is the opposite, and this gives rise to the interesting finding that the five teachers featured in this paper felt that their values and teaching practices were more "liberal" and open-minded than those found in the host system. This has implications for understanding the role and contribution of immigrant teachers. According to existing research, migrant teachers serve as role models for minority/immigrant students; in contrast, our study suggests that immigrant teachers with internationalized and cosmopolitan backgrounds can actually benefit mainstream local students by exposing them to more "liberal" values and global mindedness that are lacking in the host-country education system.

To return to the title of this paper, we conclude by asserting that immigrant teachers can potentially be powerful agents of educational diversity. It is clear from our findings that teachers with migrant backgrounds have much to offer to their students and to the host country's education system. Yet, at the same time, it must also be recognized that, for various reasons, immigrant teachers' constructive negotiations by and large remain on the margins and their contributions are often limited by structural factors. Thus, on a final note, this paper agrees with existing scholarship (Cho, 2016; Georgi, 2016; Schneider & Lang, 2016) that immigrant teachers remain an undertapped and underappreciated resource and that scholarly and policy efforts to address this shortcoming ought to go further.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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