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Securing the Motherland through the Mother Tongue Policy

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Current debates pertaining to the Ministry of Education's review of the teaching of mother tongues have been about Singaporean Chinese and their relationship with the Chinese language. However, the obstacles to strengthening inter-ethnic relations posed by the allocation of the mother tongue Singaporeans learn in schools have not been given as much attention.

THE MINISTRY of Education is currently reviewing the teaching of mother tongue languages in schools. Thus far, much of the debate has been about Singaporean Chinese and their relationship with the Chinese language. However, the obstacles to strengthening inter-ethnic relations posed by the allocation of the mother tongue Singaporeans learn in schools have not been given as much attention.

The Tower of Babel

By default, Singaporeans are allocated the mother tongue language of his own race to learn in schools today. Unfortunately, this has undesirable social and economic consequences.

A social consequence is the creation of barriers to inter-ethnic communication. Because the default ascription of mother tongue languages is along racial lines, Chinese in Singapore is spoken almost exclusively by the Chinese, Malay by the Malays and the Indian languages by the Indians. Although recent statistics reveal that Singapore's lingua franca -- English -- is the language an increasing number of Singaporeans of all races are most comfortable communicating in, there remains a considerable number who prefer communicating in their mother tongues. Being unable to communicate effectively with those of a different race as themselves, the relationship of this segment of the population with others of a different race is limited to perfunctory civility. Given the current volatile inter-cultural relations across the globe, no obstacle to promoting inter-racial relations in multicultural Singapore should be tolerated.

An economic consequence relates to the importance of mother tongue language proficiency in the job market. There remain perennial concerns, especially among minorities, of the not uncommon

requirement of proficiency in Chinese found in job advertisements which inadvertently puts non-Chinese applicants at a disadvantage. Moreover, the racial ascription of mother tongues also limits the opportunities Singaporeans have to plug into the various regional economic networks: The non-Chinese would be denied an edge in engaging China, the non-Malays with our immediate neighbours and non-Indians with India.

Mother Tongue Policy Revisited

A way forward would be to leverage on Singapore's unique multilingual heritage and making the learning of all the official mother tongues accessible to Singaporeans regardless of race.

Admittedly, there are current options for students to learn a mother tongue other than their own race's. However, such options are only offered as a third language. As students proficient in two languages are already the exception rather than the norm, taking a different official mother tongue as a third language is not likely to be a realistic option to many.

An alternative way forward is to alter the allocation of the mandatory second language from the current default ascription along the student's race to one that requires their parents to decide which mother tongue their child should learn. The current review of the teaching of Chinese offers a way in. A key refinement of the teaching of Chinese is the consideration of a multi-track approach in acknowledgement that Chinese is a foreign language to the rising numbers of Singaporean Chinese from English-speaking homes. As such, the pedagogy in schools is being altered to respond to this reality.

If the solution is to teach Chinese as a foreign language to this target group of Singaporean Chinese, then it follows that the learning of Chinese can be extended to non-Chinese too. This approach to teaching of mother tongue languages can also be extended to the Malay and Indian languages. Coupled with the flexibility for parents to choose the mother tongue their child should take as a second language, the opportunity to learn a different mother tongue from one's own race will be extended to a much wider audience.

As Singaporeans will still be required to learn an official mother tongue as a second language, the twin objectives of the mother tongue policy -- to anchor Singapore's Asian identity (as opposed to a Western one) in a cosmopolitan milieu and to plug Singaporeans into the regional economic networks -- will not be compromised. Rather, empowering parents to decide the mother tongue language their child should learn in schools has social and economic merits with the potential to augment inter-racial relations.

Social and Economic Advantages

There are two ways the inter-racial social compact may be strengthened through this approach. Firstly, the language barrier to inter-racial communication faced by Singaporeans lacking proficiency in English is removed. Being able to communicate confidently in the mother tongue other than their own race's facilitates an alternative avenue to strengthening bonds with Singaporeans of a different race. Secondly, an appreciation for the culture of the official races in Singapore can be meaningfully augmented. The transmission of culture through language is nothing new and in fact has always been a cornerstone of Singapore's language education policy. As Lee Kuan Yew noted in a 1969 interview: "With the language goes the literature, proverbs, folk lore, beliefs (and) value patterns."

From an economic perspective, empowering parents to determine the mother tongue language their child should learn gives them a greater say in shaping the life chances of their child. Those who prefer to capitalise on the opportunities for their child to be immersed in a different language and culture as their own to pragmatically increase their potential market value may choose to do so, just as those who

prefer to stay rooted to their own racial heritage may choose their own race's mother tongue.

To surmise, education policies play an important role in equipping the future generation to perpetuate Singapore's unique multicultural harmony. Providing them with not just the opportunities for but also the means to inter-cultural engagement can only strengthen Singapore's identity as an open, diverse and cohesive society.

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