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Want national identity? Foster, not teach it

IN 'S'PORE's elusive identity quest' (ST, June 8), Professor Shirley Lim asserts that the 'Singaporean identity is already much present'. She argues that the 'challenge of (national) identity lies instead in these questions: Who is to be entrusted with instruction? Who gets to select the teachers, and based on what criteria?'

This, however, begs a more fundamental question: what identity is one to teach? Accepting Prof Lim's contention that the 'common (Singaporean) story is an evolving one' means less the need or possibility to teach national identity, as to foster it.

National identity may be fostered through providing greater opportunities for interaction between people at home, work and play, and improving the infrastructure for non-violent dispute resolution.

It may also be fostered through increasing the desire to identify with the nation. In Singapore's context, this involves increasing actual or perceived opportunities for participation in the common goal of a successful Singapore. 'Success' is to be widely construed. Importantly, it includes maintaining a cohesive society, which must be the bedrock of any Singaporean identity. Cohesiveness additionally acts as a bulwark against divisive forces which could tear apart the country's many achievements. Ironically, Singapore can only truly consider itself successful if, in the face of failure, its people remain united.

Prof Lim's response to the challenge of creating national identity is to teach the 'local'. While appearing to acknowledge that the schism between 'local' and 'global' is imagined, her conclusion does not support this. She argues that 'Singapore schools must move to Singapore stories and literature' and makes a case for Singlish.

Our schools are better off selecting texts on the basis of literary merit, regardless of origin. This will give students the exposure and sensitivity to language to create works which we may then proudly call our own. That inspiration may have come from outside Singapore in no way precludes this outcome. What is crucial is an emotional commitment to the nation.

In respect of Singlish, on balance, its disadvantages outweigh its advantages. Although it may be argued to promote Singaporean identity, the problem occurs for those of us who do not share an equal proficiency in English. A rude shock awaits us when we fail to be understood by English speakers in the rest of the world. Quite apart from the obvious disadvantages of this, Singlish may become a source of embarrassment rather than pride and, by association, being Singaporean a burden, rather than source of satisfaction.

The emphasis in developing national identity should be on its fostering rather than teaching. In doing so, we must not turn inwards, fearing the foreign, global or international. These sources provide rich material for a

distinct Singaporean identity - an identity which is made weaker only for want of desire.

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