

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: MANAGING DIVERSITY IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Discovering diversity takes creativity, extra effort, diligence, and courage on the teacher's part. Thus, secondary schools in Malaysia have rarely offered an enthusiastic welcome for student difference. However, a multicultural classroom must thrive on these differences and use them as a foundation for growth and development. Differences command work, resolution, openness, and understanding. Teachers who address these differences and add them to the curriculum will succeed in creating a multicultural classroom that will advance the educational goals of all students. The following article discusses some of the very basic elements of multicultural classrooms and a brief reflection on observations made at secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

A unique characteristic of our secondary schools is that the students are from three different ethnic groups namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. These three dominant ethnic groups have their own beliefs, culture, values and norms that will affect their behaviors and actions. It's a goal of Malaysian education and schooling practice to enhance social integration among these various ethnic groups beyond mere physical integration, and intends to eliminate social prejudices and discrimination. In Malaysia, the objective of nation building and forging national unity amongst the various ethnic groups ranks very high in her educational and political agendas. In fact national unity and integration are the cornerstone of the education policy. It was stated as our major goals of the national education policy as the following: *'To inculcate and nurture national consciousness through fostering common ideals, values, aspiration and loyalties in order to mould national unity and national identity in a multi-ethnic society'*.

One way to achieve these goals is to provide an opportunity for students of different ethnic groups to interact with each other. In essence, the argument holds that bringing all ethnic groups together will lead to cross-racial contact, which will lead to better understanding of other races, or ethnic groups and would promote greater social tolerance and interaction. This belief has guided much of the educational promoting school desegregation especially in USA.

From the perspective of the Inter-group Contact Theory it was believed that continuous interactions among members of majority and minority groups would lead to improvement in relationships among them. According to Allport (1958), this expectation will have a positive result if certain conditions prevail. He have

formalized the theory, stating that inter-group contact would lead to reduced inter-group prejudice if the contact situation embodies four conditions: 1) equal status between the groups in the situation; 2) common goals; 3) no competition between the groups; and 4) authority sanction for the contact. Allport emphasizes that cooperative interracial interaction aimed at attaining shared goals must be promoted to ensure positive inter-group relations.

The Purpose Of Study

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of inter-ethnic interaction amongst students of various ethnic groups in secondary schools in Malaysia. Teachers who address these differences and add them to the curriculum will succeed in creating a multicultural classroom that will advance the educational goals of all students. The following article discusses some of the very basic elements of multicultural classrooms and a brief reflection on observations made at secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia

What Is Multiculturalism?

The concept of multiculturalism embodies a new orientation toward the future. Unfortunately, in all the heated discussion around the term no clear definition of the concept has yet emerged. People are thus left to read into the term whatever their biases

Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society.

There are the four pairs of action phrases that give substance to the definition: beliefs and behaviors, recognizes and respects, acknowledges and values, encourages and enables, and a fifth one, empowers. Multiculturalism is a system, a set of interrelated parts—in this case, beliefs and behaviors—which make up the whole of how humans experience today's world. It includes what people believe about others, their basic paradigms, and how this impact, and are impacted by, behavior. Multiculturalism also entails *acknowledging* the validity of the cultural expressions and contributions of the various groups. This is not to imply that all cultural contributions are of equal value and social worth, or that all should be tolerated. Multiculturalism thus means *valuing* what people have to offer, and not rejecting or belittling it simply because it differs from what the majority, or those in power, regard as important and of value. Multiculturalism will also *encourage* and *enable* the contribution of the various groups to society or an organization.

Managing Diversity:

Historic colonizing empires like Spain, Portugal and England, and modern nations like the United States, South Africa, Japan, Germany, and now newly emerged nations with their “ethnic cleansing” efforts, have managed diversity most effectively as communities have also managed diversity well. Managing diversity is an on-going process that unleashes the various talents and capabilities which a diverse population bring to an organization, community or society, so as to create a wholesome, inclusive environment, that is safe for differences, enables people to reject rejection, celebrates diversity, and maximizes the full potential of all, in a cultural context where everyone benefits. Multiculturalism, as the art of managing diversity, is an *inclusive* process where no one is left out. In an age of cultural pluralism, multiculturalism is needed to manage diversity effectively. In essence, then, multiculturalism is nothing more than the art of managing diversity in a total quality manner. It is the only option open to educators, leaders and administrators in an ever-increasing culturally pluralistic environment. Malaysia’s diverse population is simply not going to go away, but increase. This is the direction of the future—multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual communities.

Teachers in multicultural classrooms must be open to their students and put forth the effort needed to get to know their students inside and outside of class. If a teacher is hesitant about being open, the class will reciprocate and the students will become estranged from one another and the teacher. In order to be open, teachers must be interested in their students, fearless, willing to try new and different things, sure of themselves in order to avoid taking things personally, and non-judgmental of his or her students. Also, openness is not making assumptions and being prepared for the unexpected (Canning 1995). In the Mexican-American culture, children are accustomed to hugging, kissing, or touching (arm squeezing or rubbing the back of) figures of authority. Christine Canning (author of "Getting From the Outside In: Teaching Mexican Americans When You Are an 'Anglo'") writes of her experience, "I noticed that students touched my hand or arm while talking to me. I was feeling uncomfortable with this until it occurred to me that touching might be a cultural behavior" (1995). Canning's initial close-mindedness toward the touching could've caused an awful situation especially because the students were doing their best to be absolutely respectful. After discussing the students' behavior with a fellow teacher, Canning learned that the students were showing her respect and in no way trying to make her feel uncomfortable.

Many cultures have many different mores and folkways. Teachers must be open to what the students are doing and find out why they do what they do. This openness will create communication in the class, which will ultimately develop into a classroom that is learning, understanding, and culturally fluent. In addition to openness, teachers must know the learning patterns of the students in their class. Teachers must understand the learning patterns of the students who grew up in a culture other than their own.

DISCUSSIONS

Observations in secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia found that it can be hard for a teacher to understand and grow accustomed to students diversity. If a teacher uses instructional methods like group discussion, student presentations, and tries to activate students as they lecture, the teacher may become frustrated, disenchanted, and may even think that students are below average students with below average intelligence. This is not the case, Malaysian students are taught to sit, listen, and recite memorized information. Students do not participate in the class and believe everything that the teacher says is absolutely true. Teachers who open themselves up to cultural difference will effectively handle culture clash while teachers who assume that Malay students are rude and Indian students are dumb will close communication in the classroom and destroy any hope of having a multicultural classroom. The best way to handle culture clash is to be open, knowledgeable, and not be afraid to talk about the cultural differences in class no matter what discipline the teacher is teaching. An open teacher will create an open class and an open class will have open lines of communication that will create a positive and beneficial learning environment for everyone.

Language difference is another major issue that teachers must address when establishing a multicultural classroom. A teacher who tries to learn the native tongue of her or his students, if only a word or two, will convey respect for the culture of his or her students and increase their potentially suffering self-esteem. Introducing the language or culture of all students in the class into the curriculum will communicate that students of that culture are important. However, a teacher should not assume that a Chinese student grew up in the Malaysian culture and knows about it. In order to establish a respect for other cultures in the classroom, teachers must move beyond "multicultural moments" or pseudomulticulturalism (Miller, 1997). Miller suggests that one very simple way for all teachers to add multicultural ideas and content to his or her curriculum is to build a classroom library of multicultural literature (Miller, 1997). No matter what subject you teach you can build a library of books by and/or about different cultures.

True multicultural activities must be ongoing and integrated daily in both informal and formal activities. Gloria Boutte and Christine McCormick suggest six basic principles for teachers to use when evaluating their culturally diverse classroom, these are, 1) building multicultural programs, 2) showing appreciation of differences, 3) avoiding stereotypes, 4) acknowledging differences in children, 5) discovering the diversity within the classroom, 6) avoiding pseudomulticulturalism (140). Showing appreciation of differences is very important because a teacher who does not show appreciation of all the differences in their class will not get the chance to attempt any of the other five principles. Teachers need to pay attention to their verbal and nonverbal language when he or she responds to students who speak differently.. However, the most important thing to remember about all classrooms is the premise that every child is unique. All children are

different and beautiful in their own way, no one student should feel excluded from the class especially if the reason they feel they are excluded is based on race, ethnicity, or color. Teachers need to show the colour of our world every time they enter a classroom whether math, science, art, or physical education.

An important step in teaching children to be comfortable with their cultural background and essentially themselves is to encourage and value their input in a small group of other students. This has to do with the organization of the classroom and the development of lesson plans. When grouping students, teachers should put students from differing backgrounds and ethnic together.. An accomplished teacher should be able to create projects for a group of students from different backgrounds and ethnic groups that will require students to work together, therefore allowing each student to be an important part of the group and learn information through the interaction of the group. Lesson plans that can do this and interest students will become invaluable for teachers to possess as the need for teachers to become culturally fluent continues to grow. This is rarely done in the schools observed.

Observations done in the secondary schools found that teachers are not competent enough regarding to multiculturalism. Teachers should be competent in the context of actual pluralism will mean being able to participate effectively in a multicultural world. It will mean being "*bicultural*" as well as bilingual. It will mean knowing how to operate as a competent actor in more than one cultural world; knowing what's appropriate and what's inappropriate, what's acceptable and unacceptable in behavior and speech in cultures that differ quite radically from one's own. Competence in a pluralist world will mean being able to function effectively in contexts people had previously only read about, or seen on television. It will mean knowing how to be 'different' and feeling comfortable about it; being able to be the 'insider' in one situation and the 'outsider' in another. Managing diversity, then, may very well be part of an on-going process which enables teachers to become *world citizens*—persons who are able to transcend their own racial/ethnic, gender, cultural and socio-political reality and identify with students from different ethnic groups. They are thus a *transcending* people who know no boundaries, and whose operating life-principle is compassion. This is the principle that should be modeled in schools at all levels, in the process of living diversity.

There are many reasons to account for this concern. Many experienced teachers, especially older teachers who earned their degrees more than 10 years ago, were not required to take any courses specifically related to multicultural education. These teachers have become acquainted with multicultural education concepts and practices through a variety of avenues based on their own interests and levels of motivation or the insights and incentives of their school and district administrators. Cultural diversity was not a clearly defined educational issue when many of them began their teaching careers. The Malaysian education

system contains some multicultural aspects according to the Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan but a fully multicultural education system is not implemented.

For some teachers, however, courses in multicultural education were included either at the undergraduate or graduate courses level, but the multicultural education concepts frequently were constructed as additive to education rather than infused into the curriculum and instruction. Similarly, a few teachers may have completed a course labeled multicultural education that was actually more of an ethnic course – not a course exploring multicultural education inclusive of people, policies, programs, process, and practices. Courses such as these did not elucidate the meaning of multicultural education.

The research also reported that 90% of the experienced teachers are working in schools where no or few multicultural education in-services have been offered. When in-services are conducted, often they are extremely short, catered to fit into the school schedule, and held before or after the regular school day. The teachers reflected that this brevity generally makes the in-service superficial in content coverage and, again, communicates an additive approach for using multicultural education practices.

One teacher summarized, “I wish our school would dedicate a full day or more of staff development to learning more about multicultural education, ourselves, and society rather than just trying to fix ‘those children’ and improve test scores in quick little in-services. It seems like we should do this right.”

CONCLUSION

As our country continues to exhibit great diversity, the need for understanding and accepting the differences among all people has never been more important. Thus, the challenge for educators is to present an effective multicultural education foundation by means of which all children can learn to accept others. The goal of multicultural education is not only to teach children about other groups or countries. It is also to help children become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view. The purpose of multicultural curriculum is to attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each child will feel included and valued, and will feel friendly and respectful toward people from other ethnic and cultural groups. One key to helping young children develop a sense of being citizens of the world lies with the early childhood teacher. The disposition exhibited by this individual in promoting everyone's culture will be the successful factor in the child's development of a multicultural perspective.

Creating multicultural classrooms is a growing priority for all teachers and administrators. This includes restructuring the curriculum and classroom evaluation, but, more importantly, it includes embracing difference and opening up the classroom for communication. Schools in Malaysia are making vast improvements in this area but more still needs to be done. Our world is multicultural, and children need to experience the diversity outside their

immediate environment. If children are to know about minority groups, they must be taught about them in the same way they are taught about majority groups. Otherwise, children can grow to adulthood unaware of, and insensitive to, the experiences of other cultural groups. This is a colorful world let us, the future teachers, make sure that we paint our classrooms with these colors every single day.

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