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## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION PRACTICE AMONG TEACHERS IN NATIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY IN KEDAH

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**Abstrak:** Pendidikan pelbagai budaya ialah penstrukturan keutamaan pendidikan, komitmen dan proses refleksi tentang masyarakat pelbagai budaya seperti di Malaysia. Keutamaan pendidikan selalunya memberi fokus kepada pembangunan dan memelihara kesedaran tentang pelbagai budaya seperti yang direfleksikan oleh individu, kumpulan dan komuniti. Pendidik perlu peka dan komited dalam memahami konsep perbezaan budaya seperti yang dipersepsikan melalui etnik dan kehidupan kumpulan pelbagai budaya. Keperluan pelbagai budaya dalam pendidikan dilihat daripada dimensi yang pelbagai, iaitu perhubungan antara murid, guru, komuniti dan ibu bapa, dan perhubungan interpersonal dan intrapersonal yang berpusat kepada proses pendidikan. Artikel ini membincangkan praktik guru dalam bilik darjah. Satu kajian telah dijalankan di empat buah sekolah menengah kebangsaan di Kedah. Sampel kajian ialah guru. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan guru kurang mempraktikkan pendidikan pelbagai budaya di sekolah. Sebanyak lima perkara diutarakan oleh guru mengapa mereka kurang mempraktikkan pendidikan pelbagai budaya di sekolah.

**Abstract:** Multicultural education is the structuring of educational priorities, commitments, and processes to reflect the reality of cultural pluralism in a multicultural society as Malaysia. Educational priorities must focus on developing and maintaining an awareness of cultural diversity as reflected by individuals, groups, and communities. It requires the commitment of educators to the basic concept of diversity as it is expressed through dimensional aspects of ethnicity and cultural group lifestyle. The need for multiculturalism in education is multidimensional. It concerns itself with relationships between pupils and teachers, parents and teacher, teacher and community, and a host of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships that are central to the educational process. This article will discuss teachers multicultural practices in the classroom. A research was conducted in four national secondary schools in Kedah with teachers as samples. The findings show that teachers are not practising multicultural education practices in schools. Five reasons were stated by teachers as to why they are not practising multicultural education practices in schools.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The reality of Malaysian society, now and in the future, is that a variety of ethnic groups, with their own distinctive lifestyles and value systems will be living together. It was based on this identified reality, that the Razak Report in 1956 stated among others things that good education must reflect diversity, encourage understanding of various cultures and lifestyles. The Razak Report thus advocated that education should encourage a commitment to shared values and should enable pupils to respond positively to these. Therefore, one of its main goals "is to change attitudes among the multiethnic pupils, and to develop a pattern of education that enables all pupils to give their best".

It is thus against this background that consideration will be given to the nature of multicultural education (referring to matters pertaining to many cultures), its aims, objections to it, responses to such objections, ways in which it can be delivered and its position in relation to mono-ethnic schools (that is schools dealing with one culture, primarily an all-Malay, all-Chinese and all-Indian culture).

### **The Origins of the Plural Society**

Malaysia has one of the most delicately balanced multiracial societies of the region. Of the 12.3 million (2003) who live in Peninsular Malaysia, 58% are Malays, 27% Chinese and 8% Indians. The remaining 7% is composed of indigenous races and Eurasians.

Until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Malay Peninsula was generally homogeneous as far as the demographic distribution was concerned. It was a monocultural society of Malays, the indigenous people. They formed about 90% of the population in 1880 (Gullick, 1969). Significant large scale immigration of Chinese and Indians is a very recent phenomena, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A substantial layer of the ethnic picture was added with the discovery of large deposits of tin ore in the Malay states in the 1860s. Chinese mine workers flocked to the rich tin fields in several parts of the Malay Peninsula. Towards the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of British control over the four Malay states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, and the prevailing political calm over these states, the Chinese came in substantial numbers, even as indentured labourers to work in the tin mines.

The third major ethnic group in the Malay Peninsula is the Indian community, about 85% of whom are the South Indian Tamils. Indian immigration coincided with the phenomenal growth of the rubber industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This triggered the demand for Indian labourers to work as rubber tappers in the

British rubber plantations and also in the laying of the infrastructural networks of transport systems of roads and railways.

A consequence of the large scale immigration of the Chinese and Indians into Malaya was the emergence of a plural society. The term "plural society" was originally coined by Furnivall (1965) to describe the situation in a multiracial environment in British Burma and Dutch Java. Under colonial rule, with the injection of major immigrant communities who were seen as a transient phenomenon. Furnivall (1965) described the prevailing society as a unit of disparate parts that mixed but did not combine. Each group held to its own religion, culture and language, ideas and ways. This was a plural society with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere, there was division along racial lines.

### **Education Since Independence**

The formulation and implementation of the educational policies in independent Malaya can be divided into three distinct periods.

The first phase is the period from 1956 till 1967. Here the goals of the policy were the attainment of national integration and unity. It was to be achieved through a plural school system and an ambivalent language policy. This period is often referred to as a period of accommodation in the educational history of the country where it accepted multilingualism in the primary schools; but national unity was sought through a common content syllabus for all schools.

The second phase starts with the passing of the National Language Act of 1967 which is seen as a move towards asserting the authority of the national language following a 10 year transition period after independence. In spite of the passage of the above Act, Malay language was not seen to be accorded its rightful role as the national and sole official language. Thus, this period till 1969 is termed as one of ambiguity.

The third phase from 1969 and thereafter is called a period of new realism where the supremacy of the national language as the main medium of instruction is unquestioned and its role in national integration and nation building recognized:

To establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole, which will satisfy their needs and promote cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country whilst preserving and

sustaining the growth and development of the language and culture of other people living in the country (Razak Report, 1956).

In Malaysia, especially in teacher training programs, there has yet to an explicit effort towards raising teachers' awareness of multicultural education. Even though in schools, teachers teach about respect and tolerance in subjects such as moral studies and religious studies, there is no specific course for multicultural education. Although this may not be necessary in schools because teachers integrate the values of equity, respect, and tolerance in the various subjects taught, however, at teacher training level there are needs to a concerted effort in raising teachers' understanding and awareness of multicultural education. Therefore, teacher-training programs may need to include a multicultural component to its curriculum to help prepare teachers to deal with diversity in the classroom.

### **Features of Multicultural Education**

Banks (1995), an expert on multicultural education, believes multicultural education will help determine the future of any plural society. The challenge is teaching adolescents to have a flexible, and not narrow, view of the world around them. According to Banks (1995), multicultural education represents much more than adding a few topics to the curriculum. He considers it an intervention strategy, not a program that can be stuffed into an existing syllabus. He believes schools with a rich multicultural focus share five characteristics:

1. Content integration – expanding the curriculum to acknowledge the experiences and contributions of diverse groups.
2. Knowledge construction – helping students understand how people create beliefs based on their heritage and experiences, a reflection of what Banks (1995) calls "their own cultural biographies".
3. Pedagogy – using strategies that lead to higher achievement for students of all races. For example, studies show Latino and African-American students learn more when working in cooperative groups.
4. Prejudice reduction – helping students develop more positive attitudes about people of different races and ethnicities.
5. An empowering school culture – examining the impact of school policies, such as academic tracking and discipline referrals on students from different backgrounds.

### **Effective Multicultural Practices**

Today's teachers are given many classroom responsibilities, including the charge of "multicultural education". Much has been written documenting the importance of multicultural education and outlining strategies for integrating effective strategies. Infusing culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy across the curriculum has been shown to ensure greater success for every student (Cole, 1995; Sparks, 1994).

Teachers play a vital role in deciding how to translate educational theories into appropriate practices as they plan curricular content, select materials, facilitate instruction, assess their students, and interact with families, especially when considering effective multicultural education practices. Beyond curriculum, instruction and assessment, teachers' formal and informal interactions with students communicate strong messages that guide and reinforce their students' attitudes about specific course content and the learning process in general. Teachers easily convey their own attitudes and personal perceptions about the subject matter, their values about learning, their students, the community and society-at-large as they teach their classes (Nieto, 1996; Sleeter, 1992). Multicultural education permeates all that is taught and how it is taught.

Yet, effective multicultural education practices are missing in many classrooms. The findings in this article identify five major categories for why teachers are not using effective multicultural education practices. The supporting reasons are relevant not only to individuals teaching multicultural education courses as part of a teacher education program, but they are essential for understanding the absence of effective multicultural education throughout the entire teaching profession. Becoming aware of these findings will help teacher educators, school administrators, staff developers, and most importantly, teachers address these concerns directly and successfully in their own multicultural education practices while promoting educational reform and system change.

### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to find out whether teachers in national secondary schools are practising multicultural education practices. This preliminary study of the perceptions of a group of teachers serve as impetus in the effort to explore teachers' understanding of multicultural education as practiced in Malaysia. It is hoped that the findings will provide initial information for further in-depth research in the future. The questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are teachers' perception of multicultural education?
2. What is their understanding of multicultural education?
3. Why are teachers not using effective multicultural education practices?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The sample for this research consists of teachers from national secondary schools. These teachers who have taught for at least 10 years, are in their early 40s. Most of them can be categorized as middle-class and they participate regularly in community and civic organizations. All the teachers involved have bachelor degrees.

A total of 110 teachers were involved in this research. The sample included 60 Malays, 30 Chinese and 20 Indians; 60 females and 50 males. This study was conducted toward the end of the year, following a series of learning experiences exploring and describing various effective multicultural education practices for successfully infusing culturally responsible and responsive pedagogy across the curriculum.

Teachers were asked to brainstorm and list all the possible explanations for why experienced teachers are not using effective multicultural education practices. Teachers were assured that no right or wrong answers existed; they simply needed to reflect upon their own teaching experiences, observe the teachers around them, and consider the teaching profession in general while creating their lists for the next class session.

During the second class session, teachers were placed into small discussion groups to share their reasons. Each group's list was consolidated into a single list. Then the consolidated lists for each of the four groups were condensed into one large list. Interestingly, similar conversations were held in each of the four groups, and the same items were found on each of their lists.

An exciting and vital series of discussions accompanied this study; the teachers deliberated at length, attempting to differentiate among effective, ineffective or absent multicultural education practices. They concluded that all teachers are responsible for infusing culturally responsible pedagogy into their classroom just as they are responsible for using effective teaching strategies in other subject areas to meet students' individual needs and interests. These powerful conversations helped the students to identify and understand a major concern associated with the field of multicultural education.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Teachers participating in this study identified more than 50 reasons why teachers aren't using effective multicultural education practices. As the trends began to emerge, teachers organized their reasons into five major categories to better manage and understand their data. The five major categories included:

1. Teachers do not know or understand what multicultural education is.
2. Teachers do not know how to use effective multicultural education practices.
3. Teachers are not motivated to learn effective multicultural education practices.
4. Teachers do not realize their full responsibilities as educators for using effective multicultural education practices.

Teachers stated various reasons for not practising multicultural education practices.

### **Understanding of Multicultural Education**

The principal reasons given by every group distinctly stated that most teachers lack of clear definition or understanding of what multicultural education is. The overriding question repeatedly arose. How can experienced teachers use effective multicultural education practices if they don't know what multicultural education is?

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 learn 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."

### **Application of Effective Multicultural Education Practices**

In addition to not knowing what multicultural education is, most teachers (92%) are unsure how to use effective multicultural education practices, particularly how to integrate and infuse culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy across their curricula. The research reported that some teachers (65%) may be acquainted with this terminology; yet few teachers (35%) are clear as to the meaning of the terms, especially for infusing cultural diversity and applying effective strategies into subject areas other than social studies or literature. Teachers tend to decontextualize curriculum in order to address multicultural education concepts. This observation parallels findings substantiated in research related to integrating multicultural education into university teacher education programs (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Teachers also lack of skills for incorporating alternative and authentic assessments to match and expand culturally diverse student learning styles. Most teachers (95%) are unclear on how to design meaningful assessment procedures that genuinely empower students and demonstrate student achievement in various ways.

Discussions related to infusing multicultural education across the curriculum generated the observation that teachers are uncertain how or when to teach prejudice reduction, equality, and tolerance. These skills are missing for most teachers, and the teachers have had no preparation to teach these subjects regardless of their assigned content areas. And not only are teachers unprepared



to teach these concepts, teachers reported that their colleagues are uncomfortable teaching about most multicultural educational topics and issues. Compounding their lack of knowing what multicultural education is and how to use effective practices, teachers frequently consider multicultural education as a controversial subject entailing race relations and human equity – discussions they tend to avoid in their classrooms. Often, these topics are viewed as sociology and psychology, not an objective related to mathematics, science, or other curricular content.

A teacher participating in this study shared his view that, "Most of the teachers (98%) at my school claim that they are treating all students fairly; they act like teaching multicultural education is someone else's responsibility and not a part of all classrooms and school events. I think many teachers avoid multicultural education because they don't really know what it is or how to bring it into their teaching strategies. They are afraid of controversy or getting off the subject in their classrooms."

Teachers tend to view using effective multicultural education practices as requiring too much time to prepare and infuse adequately. Most teachers (99%) seem overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities they have been given and are reluctant to take on any more. They see gaining more information about multicultural education as an infringement on their time. The learning should have been provided by their teacher preparation programs or the school districts for whom they now work – not an additional requirement for working with low-achieving students.

Likewise, it was reported that most teachers (98%) would prefer a packaged multicultural education program just as they are supplied for teaching most other subject areas. Teachers might consider teaching multicultural education if a complete program with student text books, teacher guides and prepared materials was provided for them with all the necessary tools for effective multicultural education.

### **Motivation to Learn Effective Multicultural Education Practices**

A third major category that emerged from this study identified this finding for a variety of reasons. Research reported that many teachers (98%) simply are not interested in learning about effective multicultural education practices; they claim that there is little or no time to learn about such practices. This belief extends to teachers' perceptions that to prepare and infuse effective multicultural education practices into their current teaching styles requires too much time – time that they feel is necessary to attend to other classroom responsibilities.

Teachers stated that time to learn effective multicultural education practices could be provided by school administrators if their administrators valued the notion or if this idea was supported by the school district administration. Teachers acknowledged that they would be motivated to continue learning effective multicultural education practices if the administration provided the time and resources to attend classes and purchase materials.

Most teachers are unwilling to pursue these endeavours on their own time and with their own money. Experienced teachers, particularly those who have completed their masters degrees, are less likely to enroll in university courses to earn addition credits toward their salary increase. These teachers can earn credits toward maintaining their profession through other means and usually do not select courses that address cultural diversity, especially if multicultural education is not a goal or emphasis of the administration.

In one of the more revealing findings of this study, most teachers (95%) are not motivated to learn effective multicultural education practices because *they feel there is no need to change their current approaches*. Teachers do not internalize a need to know or infuse the ideals of a culturally responsible and responsive pedagogy. In many situations, their students are achieving well and the community is pleased with the school. Teachers are preoccupied with addressing other educational needs on interest and receiving support to bring new concepts and practices into their classrooms. Their professional and personal conversations do not focus on the need to learn effective multicultural education practices.

### **Resistance to Learning Effective Multicultural Education Practices**

The belief that teachers are not motivated to learn effective multicultural education practices is strengthened by their resistance to learn them. Many different reasons were given, rationalizing teacher resistance.

Some teachers (35%) feel that they currently are using effective multicultural education practices in their classrooms. Unfortunately, these teachers incorporate global studies or ethnic studies into their course content and consider these to be effective multicultural practices. Some teachers (23%) have confused their global travels and personal backgrounds with cross-cultural experiences and are resistant to modifying their practices.

Similarly, some teachers are resistant to learning effective multicultural education practices because they feel anything multicultural is overly concerned with race relations and controversial issues. This reinforces the first major finding that teachers do not know or understand what multicultural education is. Teachers just want to teach their assigned subject areas. Experienced teachers also resist

learning effective multicultural education practices if they believe that their own professional knowledge, skills and status are threatened. They do not want to change what they believe works.

This belief is supported when teachers perceive that they culturally match their students and community. Teachers are resistant to learn or use effective multicultural education practices if they feel that their classrooms are not multicultural. Learning multicultural education is viewed by some experienced teachers as necessities required for preservice teachers or professionals. These teachers do not realize that all children benefit from learning about all kinds of children.

This study also showed that it is not only Malay teachers who exhibit a lack of understanding of cultural diversity and resistance to multicultural education. Some Chinese (35%) and Indian teachers (14%) state that they fully understand multicultural education. These individuals claim that their personal lives have provided them with enough empirical evidence to be multiculturally astute and are more attentive to multicultural education. Obviously, all teachers bring unique experiences to their teaching repertoire; some teachers reap the benefit of a greater diversity of life experiences than other teachers. However, all teachers gain from formal instruction offered in multicultural education as they learn more about others as well as themselves.

### **Responsibilities as Educators**

The research concluded that most teachers (90%) do not fully realize or accept their responsibilities as educators. Because many teachers do not know or understand what multicultural education is, and they do not know how to use effective practices, teachers are not providing the best education opportunities that they can for their students regardless of the students' backgrounds and learning needs, the curricular content area, and the quality of instruction. Teachers need to learn how to infuse culturally responsible and responsive pedagogy across the curriculum and throughout the school environment to assure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

All teachers are responsible for teaching students about all kinds of people both during formal instruction and during informal, casual conversations. Experienced teachers do not realize what strong influences and powerful role models they are for young people as they demonstrate the importance of being aware of others, valuing cultural diversity and behaving respectfully toward others. Frequently, young students never even realize how they were exposed to negative role-modeling by their teachers (Cabello & Burstein, 1995).

Teachers serve as essential role models as they demonstrate the importance of learning about other students, families, and the community. These integrated learning experiences facilitate stronger communication between schools and homes. Often, teachers express frustration that their students' parents do not visit or support their children's schools; using effective multicultural education practices could extend a greater welcome. Likewise, teachers inform and support one another; it is important for teachers to demonstrate and reinforce learning and use effective multicultural education practices within all educational environments.

Experienced teachers also serve as role models not only to their students but also to preservice teachers. Universities and teacher training colleges rely on these experienced teachers to blend educational theories with useful practices. If preservice teachers do not observe their field placement teachers modeling effective teaching strategies for infusing multicultural education, the preservice teachers are less likely to integrate strategies across their curriculum and instruction (Deering & Stanutz, 1995).

Teachers need to understand that as well-educated and successful individuals, they must realize and accept their full responsibilities for using effective multicultural education practices. They must be willing to change as Malaysia and the rest of the world changes.

### **Suggestions for Educational Reform and Systemic Change**

This study, which was designed to apply theories of multicultural education, revealed clear implications for the experienced teachers. The research began with looking at possible connections between the ideals of teachers and their own educational environments; the inquiry seemed rather simplistic: "Why aren't experienced teachers using effective multicultural education practices?" At the end of the research, the findings strongly imply that many changes need to occur. These findings provide teacher educators, school administrators, staff developers, and most importantly, experienced teachers with many reasons for change, organized into the identified five major categories. These categories furnish educators with a quick and useful review of teacher beliefs and behaviors generated by experienced teachers.

Effecting change is challenging. Average experienced teachers, have established themselves comfortably within their schools and communities, and many are resistant to change. They seem sure of who they are. They consider themselves competent and confident in their teaching practices, perceptions that have been reinforced positively and frequently by their students, colleagues and school administrators. Yet, all too often, these same teachers lack the knowledge, skills,

and beliefs about diversity that are necessary to ensure student achievement and success.

To ensure that culturally responsible and responsive pedagogy is infused into all classrooms, continued efforts must be made to reach out to all teachers, administrators, and staff members while building upon their years of teaching and variety of educational experiences. Opportunities for all school personnel to learn more about multicultural education and for valuing cultural diversity will help to reform education and ensure that all children will be successful in school and in life.

Teachers, staff and administrators must be provided meaningful staff development in-services by qualified and well-prepared facilitators who will help teachers to know and understand what effective multicultural education is to them as human beings and as professionals. All school personnel will benefit from quality staff development in-services that advance their abilities to know themselves, to honor and respect every individual, to communicate more effectively with one another, and to assure consistently equitable educational opportunities for students and their families. These experiences establish a deeper understanding for the values, beliefs and meaning of multicultural education.

Likewise, all teachers, staff and administrators need to see and experience effective multicultural education practices that provide safe, healthy and welcoming educational environments. School personnel need to be shown how to ensure the use of culturally inclusive language and curriculum throughout all of the policies, programs, materials, and resources helping them to know and understand how to use effective multicultural education practices. Demonstrations introducing multicultural literature, authentic use of books and materials, and culturally inclusive displays need to reflect the nation's and world's cultural diversity in realistic and genuine ways. Likewise, school personnel need to be aware that classroom and school-wide events need to honor and respect diverse student and community populations.

Teachers also will benefit from in-services that help them to develop their skills to implement a variety of instruction strategies and ensure increased academic achievement of all students. Many teachers welcome additional instruction demonstrating the use of alternative and authentic forms of assessment that reflect fair and impartial teaching and testing programs, even as a growing emphasis is placed on test scores and academic performance.

Teachers continue to report that administrators play a key role to guarantee equity in all education environments for students, families and teachers. Teachers and administrators working collaboratively are seen as being instrumental for

motivating teachers to learn effective multicultural education practices, reducing teacher resistance and establishing teachers' responsibility for using effective multicultural education practices. Administrations must provide the financial resources, facilities, time and staffing for additional staff development opportunities for teachers. Administrators can introduce enriched and comprehensive curriculum and educational programs for students while requiring fair and impartial assessments and testing programs. For these to be successful, administrators need to be well-acquainted in effective multicultural education practices, curricular development, instructional strategies, their teachers, and their communities through an openness to new and creative approaches that value cultural diversity. I believe through the educational leadership and staff development opportunities provided by insightful administrators and supported by culturally sensitive teachers, more teachers and school personnel will be using effective multicultural education practices.

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