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The Tolerant Classroom: Challenges in Fostering Multi-Ethnic Tolerance in Visual Arts Education

Siti Zuraida Maaruf^{a*}, Saedah Siraj^b, Khadijah Said Hashim^c, VovianaZulkifli^d

^{ca} Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, 40200 Selangor, Malaysia

^b Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

^d Independent Researcher

Abstract

Unity and tolerance are imperious in the development of educational policy in multi-ethnic Malaysia. Efforts are taken cautiously to implement an educational policy which would include and acknowledge the diverse cultural values in the curriculum. Visual Arts Education is conceded as a unifying tool in education and for life-long understanding and tolerance of ethnic diversity. This qualitative case study on a Visual Arts Education teacher with seventeen years of experience teaching the subject in a national school investigates factors which impede educators in the process of fostering multi-ethnic tolerance in the arts classroom. Some of these factors which become the challenges for Visual Arts Education teachers in fostering multi-ethnic tolerance in the classrooms are the nonchalant attitude towards visual arts education, ethno-centric grouping and the time fringe in completing the syllabus.

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1. Introduction

In countries of multi-ethnicity population, political influences in education have always foreshadowed decisions made in attempts to include and sustain each ethnic value in the curriculum. In Malaysia's Vision 2020 list of agenda, its foremost ideal is to form a united nation facing equal challenges in pursuit of national

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +017-652 5400
E-mail address: aidasam79@yahoo.com

development. For this pursuit, the Malaysian government has established a common language which is the Bahasa Malaysia (or the Malay language) to foster unity amongst its multi-ethnic people. Nevertheless, formal education is seen as another essential tool to unite and most importantly to instil tolerance in a nation of multi-ethnicity.

A major concern that needs to be consistently addressed in the Malaysian educational system is the strengthening of tolerance among students of different ethnic groups. Despite efforts in instilling tolerance among multi-ethnics in the educational system and curriculum, ethnic derogatory among school students are still at large. Gelineau (2012) suggested that arts can be used “as aid to helping children understand cultures different from their own, the arts can play a vital role not only in illuminating origins and customs but also in awakening awareness of the universality of the human spirit” (p. 11). Therefore, the Visual Arts Education is a subject that could be a bridge linking ethnic tolerance between students. This case study aims to investigate the challenges that Visual Arts Education teachers face in schools to foster multi-ethnic tolerance among students during lessons.

1.1 Visual Arts Education and Cooperative Learning

The present curriculum used for Visual Arts Education in Malaysian schools is in accordance to that laid out in the Malaysia Educational Syllabus 2000. The subject is seen to be capable in developing students’ civic awareness, and it is considered to have the ability to build students moral and ethical values in the real world setting (Md. Nasir&Ibrahim, 2003). Additionally, society is considered as a substance for students when they create an art piece because it is essential for the students to foresee the implications that their artwork would morally present towards society. Therefore, Md. Nasir and Ibrahim (2003) asserted that teachers need to muster teaching strategies and learning approaches which would fill any gaps among students to acquire new experiences during learning which is achievable through cooperative learning.

Woolfolk (2010) defines cooperative learning as a set of process which allows students to interact with one another in achieving a common specific objective or a common end product for a specified learning objective. The term collaboration, group work and cooperative learning are often used in teaching and learning activities to describe students working together however, a clear definition to distinguish each term has yet to be identified. The differences between the term collaboration and cooperative are still vague and call for further research to expound the two terms when used in classroom activities. Nonetheless, strategies used in both cooperative and collaborative learning are almost similar in which students are required to work together as a group to solve a problem, to respond and communicate in structured manner.

1.2 Visual Arts Education and Multi-Ethnic Tolerance

The principle in arts such as lines, shapes, colours, textures, values, density and physical mass of an element in the Visual Arts Education classroom with western values have long been used in the Malaysia curriculum. These elements are necessary in the teaching of artistic values in the production of an art piece to demonstrate the diverse patterns, movements, focus and other elemental characteristics which would make a product invaluable. Nevertheless, the same values are not given equal emphasis in the teaching of cultural arts in the Malaysia Visual Arts Education classrooms. Students would usually replicate existing art form especially those arts which come from other than their own culture. For example, Malay students with no or little background of the Chinese culture would only replicate the figure of a dragon in sculpting without having to go through any kinds of necessary research for further understanding of its importance.

Trained teachers are equipped with knowledge and understanding in teaching approaches for Visual Arts Classrooms with students of multi-ethnicity. In education, Richmond (2002) emphasized skills development, attentiveness, and knowledge in the creation and appreciation of an art piece contributes to the development and liberation of the minds. This will indirectly uplift the dignity of certain groups of people or in this case a particular ethnicity in society. Chalmers (1996) encouraged others to query on matters such as the purpose of arts and how art is utilized in life. Chalmers further added that an art educator should realize the functions and roles

that arts have in the society so that it would be an added values to make arts education more relevant to students in the teaching and inculcating multi-cultural tolerance.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are two-fold, namely to identify factors which contribute to the difficulties to foster multi-ethnic tolerance among students. Then, it investigates the challenges that Visual Arts Education teachers face in schools to foster multi-ethnic tolerance among students during lessons.

1.4 Methodology

This qualitative case study uses interview, observation and document analysis with an experienced Visual Arts Education teacher from a local government school. Data collected for this study were collected through interview notes, recorded conversations and classroom observation. The case study takes on the real classroom situation during teaching and learning in the school's Arts Studio. The observation in this case study includes the teacher's efforts to foster tolerance and specific attention is given towards efforts to foster multi-ethnic tolerance among students. The case study uses purposive sampling in which the teacher being studied is a Visual Arts Education Teachers with seventeen years teaching experience. This case study looks into the perspective of one sample to gain in-depth description and explicit analysis based on the real-life experiences of the sample (Meriam, 2009). Additionally, the purpose of using a single sample is to answer empirical inquires in investigating contemporary phenomenon in real-life situations especially when the phenomenon does not reflect the background of the educational philosophy (Yin, 2008). Recordings of conversations were transcribed verbatim before analysis. An Informed consent has been given by the sample to use her nickname for the purpose of the analysis. The researcher checked each line of the transcription thoroughly to search for words or key words related to the research question of the study. Analysis includes locating and listing the statements of meaning into units followed by structural descriptions and the overall experience of the situation. The general description is then put into sub-categories for more coherent discussion with representation of narration for the substance using statements and meaning units.

2. Findings

2.1 Factors Contributing to the Challenges in Fostering Ethnic Tolerance

2.1.1 From cat-fight to ethnic gang-fight

Prior to reporting the trials the informant experienced in fostering tolerance to students, she shared her knowledge on the enigmas revolving ethnic tolerance in schools and its causes. Following are responses gathered from the researcher's (R) interview with the respondent (P). The respondent pointed out that cat fights could become grave when a petty grievance is taken too seriously by the students.

R : *Have you ever encountered students fighting in school with regard to ethnic issues?*

P : *Yes, ... they are usually about ethnic especially between Malay and Indian students. Hardly ever the fights involve Chinese students especially around Shah Alam... Probably because they are the minority group in the school, but between the Malays and the Indians....cases among them is common.*

R : *What usually causes the fights between them?...would you consider them trivial?*

P : *... I dunno...but, I think they are trivial...sometimes, a fight is triggered by students pushing one another and teenage cheekiness sprout to gang fight...you know, each one of them wants*

to just show off who could give a stronger blow to the head...(L591, Interview 1st October 2010).

2.1.2 From inattentive parenting to intolerant insolent children

Much to the informant's chagrin, the issue of intolerance among students can sometimes be instigated by lack of parental control and in the students' choice of joining bad crowds. The respondent further added that the habit of skipping out of school sparks off disciplinary issues among students. It is also a trying endeavour for the respondent as an arts teacher to foster tolerance among her students when they have developed other insolent acts such as smoking, loafing, petty thief, or watch pornography when they skipped out of school.

- P : ... when I was the disciplinary teacher...these are some of the snags I get from the students; skipping school, loafing, smoking....bet there was an incident when a student steal...one problem usually leads to another...haaaa...when the students skipped school...the place which they hang out would be the place they savour pornography. It's also a trend for them to send pornography through short massaging on the mobile phone...*
- R : In your opinion, what is the crux to all these uncharacteristic behaviour?*
- P : Well, to me... the root to all of these delinquencies would be the in the weakness of roles played by the family institution. Most students in this school are from working class family and some of their parents make a living as hawkers at the night market...well, you know, while their parents are working hard to bring the bread and butter home, the children are mostly left at home and tend to themselves. Some take the opportunity to meet up with bad crowd...girls or boys...it's not easy to handle these students in the classroom...(L561-572, Interview 2, October 11th, 2010).*

2.1.3 Tolerance – just another subject in the examination

The informant further exerted that it can also get very frustrating when efforts to foster ethnic tolerance among students are only acknowledged by students simply for passing or excelling in the examination. Students only see tolerance as just another 'learning subject' that they can learn and will be tested. This hinders the fostering of such meaningful value as part of their lives especially when socializing with those from differing ethnics.

- P :the students will only realize the value of tolerance when they get into fights, that makes them really immature...they could just forget all the values they have learnt in the classroom...(L611-613)... actually, tolerance needs to be instilled to everyone in the society....it isn't not to be taken just as a learning subject...it needs to be practised...if not, it is not going to do any good....students will only take tolerance as another subject to be tested during examination....they need to learn that these values are supposed to be practised in their lives...(L617-619, Interview 2, October 11th, 2010).*

The respondent further exhorted that it is elemental Visual Arts Education be accepted by the general public in efforts to foster tolerance among school students. This substantial element is next discussed.

2.2 Impeding Issues in Fostering Tolerance in the Visual Arts Education

2.2.1 Visual Arts Education – the unappealing subject

Though having the drive in performing classroom activities to foster ethnic tolerance for her students, the informant feels that the essence for the success of such ideal is for Visual Arts Education to be accepted as

equally important like any subjects taught in the school. She finds that it is also necessary that students find the subject as appealing to learn. Urban legend in school has it that it is very challenging to foster ethnic tolerance to students from the low academic achievement group. The informant suggested that the classroom environment could be a factor which hinders the fostering of multi-ethnic tolerance among students.

2.2.2 Ethno-centric grouping

Fostering tolerance among students during classroom activities is challenging and it may be due to students' inclination towards mono-ethnic social group in and off school. Having the experience of teaching in public schools for seventeen years, the respondent observed that students have the predisposition to only socialize with students who are of the same ethnicity. Both male and female students would be more at ease when they socialize with others who are of the same ethnic background. Additionally, the lack of group work in classroom activities could be another contributing factor which makes fostering multi-ethnic tolerance become a trying effort for the teachers. Shahbudin et. al. (2007) proposed that group work is incumbent to make allowance for students to socialize and to encourage active participations from students during classroom activities. Learning is expected to transpire when students of mix abilities are grouped together during an activity by utilizing various cognitive strategies to achieve a learning objective. Students will be put into a small group to discuss the activity with the teacher acting as a facilitator during the classroom activity.

P : ...students would sit among their friends (of the same ethnicity). The Malays would sit with the Malays only. There are those who would sit with those from other ethnics...like an Indian boy wouldn't mind sitting next to a Malay girl. However, when they are left with no choice, students would just find a seat whichever that they can get in the classroom... (L553-579, Interview October 1st, 2010).

2.2.3 The nonchalant students

The informant further highlighted that another stumbling block in efforts to foster tolerance among students in the Visual Arts Education classroom is in the attitude of the students towards the subject. Most students are not in favour to work in groups especially when they are grouped with members of multi-ethnic background. Students are more comfortable to be grouped among friends who are of the same ethnic background. When given the opportunity to select their own group members and it is palpable that students would be among their close friends and most discerningly, the group would comprise of students from the same ethnicity. When they are requested to shuffle the group members so they would have members of various ethnicities, students would immediately disagree with the teacher and may go to the extreme by either pleading or asking the teacher to give the rationale in forming a group of multi-ethnicity (Observation 2, October 5th, 2010).

R : Why is that so Kak Zila... from your teaching experiences as a teacher why would the students be comfortable within their own regular group?

P : Aaaa... the first reason... these students...overall...well, we have always been complacent... the students...Indian students are being them...prefer being with other Indians...Even the Chinese will just with the Chinese...even the Malays are the same... (L118-123, Interview 2, October 11th, 2010).

2.2.4 The fringing classroom

The informant prefers to have her PSV lessons in the Arts Room instead of the classroom because the setting in the Arts Room is more flexible and more suitable to have learning activities. She finds that the classroom

limits students' movement during art lessons therefore, reducing students' communication reach. However, the school has only one art room and she would need to ensure that there are no other groups using the room so she could take her students there during lessons.

P :when teaching....in the art room...until now, when I teach...I...well, if in the classroom it feels very..... restrained... because once you are used to teaching in the art room... you get to go around and you would like it....you get to sit with the students...(L425-530).....the art room is spacious haaa....but in the classroom, how? ...to rearrange the tables and chairs would take up all the teaching and learning time....(814-821, Interview October 1st, 2010).

Time fringe is another challenge that makes efforts in fostering ethnic tolerance among students during arts lessons is almost unachievable. The subject has only three meetings allocated for each week which takes about less than two hours weekly. Mohd. Noorazam (2010) agrees that time constraint is a challenge for many teachers because their lesson objectives are mostly focussed in completing the syllabus for the year. Additionally, teachers would also need to give students with extra activities prior to any examination to achieve the target performance standards. This is especially crucial when they are preparing students for standardized testing.

P : Classroom management is a challenge indeed for any teachers...but, teachers need to be smart about it... (L198-199, Interview, October 11th, 2010)

Another classroom fringe which challenges the fostering of tolerance among students especially ethnic tolerance is in the blatant ethnic discrimination that teachers demonstrate towards students. Instead of becoming a model of tolerance for the students, teachers also are the culprits in making all good efforts become frail. Najeemah (2006) underlined that teachers are role models for what they teach to their students. As much as teachers expect students to demonstrate what has been taught to them, teachers must first take the lead.

R : Has there been issues when teachers discriminate the Malay, Indian, and Chinese students?

P : Maybe...it has been a contributing factor for students not to be able register in their head the importance of tolerance. However, it is very important that teachers do not discriminate students based on their ethnicity...a teacher must be just...(L559-560, Interview 1, October 1, 2010)

2.2.5 The issue with the syllabus

The informant is in the opinion that the present Visual Arts Education syllabus gives more focus for the Malay arts and equal attention is not given to the arts from other ethnicity. Due this lack of diversity in the syllabus, the informant sees the situation as another aspect of arts education that makes fostering multi-ethnic tolerance becomes challenging. The informant claimed that the present Visual Arts Education syllabus heavily emphasizes the Malay traditional arts. It does not give any credit to any traditional arts and crafts from other ethnicity (document analysis 3). Bates urged in his study that arts education must be multicultural in nature encompassing all groups of a society. The curriculum need to address specifically a single group of ethnic and it should not also designed by giving focus to a dominant ethnic.

P : I would agree for the Visual Arts Education syllabus to include topics on crafts by all the various ethnics. I think that the present syllabus only focuses on the Malay crafts. I also feel that students from other ethnicity gets uninterested to participate in most of the activities but like batik....that is the only one that could

actually attract students of various groups.... but, that is just my opinion (L519-532, Interview 2, October 11, 2010)

Another issue that the informant raised during the interview is the large amount of topics which need to be completed for the whole year so they can be tested in the examination. This leads to the teachers simply rushing through teaching with the students learning only to prepare themselves for examination making whatever values inserted are taken for granted. It is disappointing to the informant that with this happening, students memorize the value of tolerance as content for them as answers to some examination questions. This impedes meaningful learning in the long term.

P : ...it is true that the Visual Arts Education topics which must be covered for the year is considerably hefty...especially for SPM, I need to cover syllabus from Form 1 to Form 5 and there are times when it is almost impossible for students to digest every input....and emphasis is given towards examination....it wouldn't be achievable with the time allocated... (L550-553, Interview 2, October 11th, 2010).

3. Conclusion

Overall, the teaching of Visual Arts Education must be in sync with efforts to foster the values of tolerance which is among the thirty-six element of values which is listed in teaching and learning. Teachers must use their creative thinking skills in planning their lessons which also could foster tolerance among students especially in this matter, multi-ethnic tolerance. The informant in this study has indeed given her commitment and her best efforts to achieve the objectives of Visual Arts Education subject in school as a driving tool that assist in fostering multi-ethnic tolerance among students in and outside the classroom. The informant's efforts were observed and the researcher has identified that the informant demonstrated how her ideas which she mentioned during the interview were exhibited in the lessons which she conducted.

The efforts in fostering multi-ethnic tolerance among students is inadvertently happening or does not happen in the learning process of Visual Arts Education in the classroom. Tolerance among multi-ethnic students in the classroom and outside the classroom will only become a success if teachers are committed in overcoming the hurdles of such efforts. The classroom setting is another factor which must be considered in which allowance of space for students to move would allow them more space to communicate with one another. Classroom activities which allow students to move around the classroom a lot would encourage group work and collaborative work. This would encourage further communication among students, and between students and the teacher which would coincidentally assist teachers in fostering tolerance in the Visual Arts Education classroom.

The informant has also highlighted that the nonchalant attitude and the perspective taken on Visual Arts Education subject is an immaterial subject in the curriculum make fostering values and tolerance become a trial. The fact that the syllabus gives focus to the Malay arts makes it discriminatory towards other cultures and unintentionally kills the interests of students from other culture in the subject. Looking at the Syllabus of Visual Arts Education content, focus is given in the teaching and learning of the Malay arts form and that of the bumiputera from Sabah and Sarawak. The syllabus fails to acknowledge and include the arts and crafts to other art forms which exist in other ethnic such as the Indian and Chinese.

Additionally, it is essential for teachers to talk the talk and walk the talk if they wish to instil tolerance among their students. Teachers must not discriminate students in any forms of conduct either in or outside the classroom setting. The informant also suggested that teachers organize activities which would encourage and boost tolerance, specifically multi-ethnic tolerance at the school level. Various types of activities organized out the classroom would provide students with various experiences which would be highly meaningful in the real life setting.

Malaysia has long established an education system which acknowledges the existence of multi-culturalism in its society thus allowing vernacular education to flourish. Although such system was established through roundtable discussion in respect for multi-ethnic tolerance and understanding, this however created segregation

among the society. This further creates the sense of belonging to only one's culture and creates a wall for students to have further understanding of other ethnicity. Such segregation may invite ethnic prejudice and stir ethnic stereotyping among school students. The in cumbersome two way communication between ethnicity may toil all efforts in developing a unified nation. UNESCO (2010) encouraged that school curriculum should be able to promote egalitarianism and the assurance that students should not discriminate or put stereotypical labelling towards others especially on matters such as ethnic diversity in a learning environment. Contemporary researches have shown that multi-ethnic education requires that the curriculum should accept and give due acknowledgement on the diverse cultures holistically which could lead to better performance in learning (Banks & Banks, 2004; Pang, 2004).

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