School redesign for fostering multiculturalism in Malaysia: Augmenting the ‘Vision School’

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Abstract
The “Vision School” was a school redesign established to foster racial coexistence and solidarity among students in Malaysia. It would house the three major vernacular elementary schools (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil) in the same compound and share common physical facilities and jointly organize select school events. A case study of three Vision Schools revealed that the idea, although, conceived for the purpose of creating a sense of multiculturalism among the students, has been allowed to fail for the lack of coordination and integration of resources. A lingering question in the study was whether the vision school could have been a success story. Based on the facts on the ground, it is believed that it could have been shaped up as a model in multicultural education. The authors examined the missing aspects of the dynamics of the vision school and recommended an augmentation to the projected model.

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1. Introduction
In 1995, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, introduced the concept of a “Vision School” (Sekolah Wawasan) as a measure to extend its efforts towards racial harmony and national integration to the elementary schools. Accordingly, a vision school would house the three major vernacular schools of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians in the same compound to share common facilities and organize joint school activities; but, maintain institutional autonomy with separate head-teacher, teachers, staff, and students. The common facilities included the multi-purpose hall, cafeteria and playing field, and the joint activities celebration of annual school events and cultural and religious festivals. The idea was to create need and opportunity for the students of the different schools to spend time together in close proximity and in play, and also to become aware of others’ social, cultural and religious practices. The policy leaders believed that the vision school arrangement would provide an educational environment that would reflect the reality of the Malaysian society (Ministry of Education, 1995). Apparently, the students of the vernacular schools would also be enabled to grow in acceptance of the diversity of the population.

The Seventh Malaysia Plan (1995-2000) projected that there would be 14 vision schools established in the country. However, in 2006, when the authors undertook a case study of three vision schools, there were only eight in

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operation, an indication that the government experienced setback in the implementation (Malakolunthu, 2009). Preliminary inquiry for the study among head teachers, teachers, and ministry staff affiliated to the vision school revealed that things were not going as well as expected. Also, there was no published report of the evaluation of vision schools from the authorities for the progress made in a decade of implementation.

2. Case Study

The exploratory case study was carried out in the Lotus Park Vision School that was considered the most advanced of the vision schools available at the time. It housed all three vernacular schools unlike a number of others that lacked representation of the Mandarin school because of the politico-ideological difference of the Chinese about the policy. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with the three head teachers and 17 teachers, and several district officers involved with the Vision School project. Observations of school sites for clues and signs that appreciated the ideals of the vision school, of teaching-learning practices indicative of multicultural education, student relationships, and teacher collaboration were conducted. Document analysis was also carried out on concept papers from the Ministry of Education, school magazines, special reports on school profiles, reports on school activities, minutes of the various subject panel meetings and staff meetings, some background information on the students, history of the school, and the principals’ biographical information, work experience, academic and professional backgrounds, and their professional duties at school.

Data were analyzed using the qualitative method of coding and clustering according to themes. The broader categories of data were policy related revolving around formulation, implementation, and evaluation, head teachers focusing on their preparation, and teacher development (Malakolunthu, 2009; Malakolunthu, Siraj, & Rengasamy, 2010). But, collectively, they pointed to shallowness in the preparation and execution of the policy in terms of understanding and commitment for the nature of the project.

3. Discussion

The ineffective job done on the vision school policy seemed to have spilled over into the head teacher preparation and teacher development. In the first place, the policy formulation did not correctly regard the vision school as an attempt at multicultural education; hence, it suffered from oversight of the principles and challenges of multicultural implementation and practices. Consequently, the school redesign has placed the participating schools effectively in ‘silos’ despite being located in the same compound. They did not operate as one system working towards one goal. The schools did not share a common vision, mission, or strategy. They were merely located in one compound without必须ing or using the tremendous amount of physical, intellectual, social, and economic resources available to them.

Scholars of multicultural education have stressed that the journey towards multiculturalism has to proceed gradually in stages and has to be carefully planned (Bennett, 1993; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003; Nieto, 2002). They have stated that changes have to happen both in the physical and socio-cultural dimensions to bring about appropriate ethos in the school environment (Babtiste, 1989; Banks, 2003; Gay, 2000; Powell, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). But, the vision school emphasized mainly the physical aspect, hence allowing limited scope for socio-cultural interaction and exchange. The joint school activities related to social, cultural, and religious events and celebrations encourage passive representation of the students, which could lead to misperception. In summary, the vision schools appear to attempt at multicultural education without the intervention of education, which deprived the students of the necessary learning experience in terms of conceptual understanding, appreciation and acceptance of self and others in moving towards the multicultural mind-set.

4. Proposed approach

The Vision School strategically provides the greatest opportunity to overcome the issue of vernacular separatism over time but it has to be properly implemented and institutionalized. Based on the data from the case
study respondents, the new version of the vision school will help to materialize the efforts of racial harmonization and integration without impairing individual school autonomy. It would fulfill the government’s objective of making the students open, informed, and accepting of others’ way of life which, in its view, would prepare them to live harmoniously in the diverse nature of the larger society. However, the proposed model requires the government to take a greater effort, and possibly some related risk, to create it.

The government has to realize that the current level of physical sharing and functionality is limiting and not inclusive nor educational, which must amended. The physical structure of the vision school has to cater for the partially integrated and wholly autonomous functioning of the member schools upon which its functionality has to be raised. The idea of the proposed approach to the vision school may be perceived effectively from the Venn diagram (Figure 1). The physical design and functionality may be categorically represented by three zones identified as A, B, and C. Zone A will represent the fully autonomous area of the individual schools. A1, A2, and A3 represent the autonomous areas of the member schools and would involve the section of functionality that they would not want to lose. Zone B will be for twin sharing between two schools thus results in three combinations namely B1, B2, and B3. They would involve the section of functionality that any two member schools may share. For example, the moral subject is offered to the non-Muslim students in correspondence to the Islamic study. The Chinese and Tamil schools may share-run the class for the different standards. Zone C represents the fully integrated functionality where all three member schools may come together. As it is, there are already many co-curricular activities and subject classes that may be placed in the zone C category. The three zones of A, B, and C effectively depict the functionality distribution that may be encouraged in the member schools, which essentially demonstrate the potential shift between vernacular separatism and integration.

It may be perceived that the proposed approach will also benefit from the economy of scale. The cost of construction of physical structures and amenities that are currently taking place on the basis of individual schools may be reduced perhaps by two thirds. Other hidden but redundant costs may also be avoided. The sharing of select classes and co-curricular activities may lead the reduction of resource requirements in terms of teachers and material support.
5. Key success factors

The new approach to the vision school project is conceived subject to the pre-condition that the policy is revamped after scrutiny of its pitfalls. The vision schools would benefit greater if the physical redesign as well as the critical actions domains of curriculum, co-curriculum, assessment, resources, and teaching-learning are incorporated and deployed holistically. They have to be supportive of multicultural education in an integrative manner. Moreover, the teachers must be trained appropriately to deliver their respective subjects in accordance to the guidelines of multicultural education. And, the head teachers have to be capable of culturally responsive leadership.

Undeniably, the vision school is certainly a bold change that involves readjustment and adaptation of beliefs, values and practices. Especially, in a country where cultural and religious sensitivity is high, such institutional transformation can create a great deal of turbulence and repercussions among the parents and community. Therefore, a steering committee in each vision school will be absolutely necessary. The proposed approach to transformation would require a steering committee that may be represented by the head teachers and deputies together with district education officers and selected community representatives who will act in the capacity of role play rather than position. Essentially, it has to be a consensus seeking body and provide overall leadership for the vision school. It will deal with issues of the vision, mission, values, and strategic thinking of the school as a whole. It will formulate necessary policies, oversee their execution, and act on contingencies. The committee may meet periodically to discuss on progress and decide on continuous support or change or amendment or renewal of direction.

It is important that the committee members are thoroughly informed about the principles and potential hazards of implementing a multicultural education program. Also, they should have the opportunity to influence the preparation of the vision school curriculum and co-curriculum for the students as well as teacher professional development. As people who are directly involved in implementing multicultural education, they will have better insight of what needs to be done.

Finally, the vision school has to be founded on a philosophy of purpose, trust, and transparency. The committee members should all be absolutely clear of the purpose they are endowed with that is supported by a shared vision, engage in open and collective discussion and decision making, and be ready to report crucial information to the public.

6. Conclusion

The vision school is definitely the best strategic option that has been conceptualized to address the vernacular separatism among the elementary schools. However, as the case study of three of the most successful vision schools in the country revealed, the policy has been put into practice with many pitfalls. Nevertheless, it does not have to be abandoned in search of an alternative. The proposed approach in this paper addresses a number of the shortcomings and also offers recommendations to further strengthen the policy. The authors believe that the most important recognition by the policy makers is that the vision school has to do with multicultural education the lack of which will always be an obstacle to racial harmony and national integration in Malaysia. At the same time, the vision school has to the potential to offer a platform to learning about multicultural education and multiculturalism the lessons of which may be augmented to other levels of schools and institutions. As the current prime minister of the country says in relation to his ‘One Malaysia’ policy, the people will have to move from mere tolerance to willing acceptance of diversity; only then there can be a true sense of unity and harmony.

References


