Promoting Culturally Responsive Schools in Malaysia : the Leadership Factor

By:

Suseela Malakolunthu

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Suseela Malakolunthu Ph.D.
Dept. of Educational Management, Planning, and Policy
Faculty of Education
University of Malaya
E-mail: suseela@um.edu.my

Abstract

Creation of 'Vision Schools' is an important step in the promotion of racial integration among the children of the multiracial Malaysian society. But the success of Vision Schools in promoting multiculturalism depends very much on the school principals and teachers. Their understanding of the Vision School concept and the skills in drawing out strategies and action plans to implement the curriculum and instructional activities are important in realizing its aims and objectives. The competency of principal(s) in the area of policy process, change management, and human development in line with the 'Vision School' policy is crucial in creating schools that are culturally responsive. Based on the findings, some systemic policy decisions can be made with regard to developing and preparing *"culturally responsive leadership"* for the Vision Schools.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, transformational leadership, change management

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INTRODUCTION

In the multiracial Malaysian society, education is seen as a viable avenue for promoting racial integration. Malaysian Ministry of Education realizing the importance of schools as the common grounds for bringing together the children of different ethnicity, race, and religion came up with a new school design called 'Vision School' that would house all three – Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil medium schools in the same compound. By doing this, the government hoped to create opportunities for student interaction and mixing around and thus foster unity and integration among the children of different ethnicities.

Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1995-2000), seven Vision Schools were planned to be constructed throughout Malaysia as pilot projects (Education in Malaysia, 2001). But currently, only six schools are operating as Vision School. Under this project, selected vernacular (Chinese and Tamil) primary schools and national primary schools (Malay medium schools) are placed in the same compound but with different administration without losing the identity of each school. The aim is to promote integration among children of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds through conversation and interaction with each other and to inculcate cooperation, understanding, and tolerance among multi-racial students (Ministry of Education, 1995). This ideal was going to be achieved through sharing of common facilities such as the school canteen, courtyard, multi-purpose hall, library, and school field. All three schools situated in the same compound too will host their annual school events such as the sports day, excellent award and prize giving day together. Thus, the implementation of the Vision Schools will create an environment that will provide opportunities for students of diverse ethnicity and racial background to converse and interact with each other. The underlying objective of the Vision Schools is to implement the practice of multiculturalism through a well developed multicultural education system that will promote racial integration in Malaysia.

WHAT IS MULTICULTURALISM?

Multiculturalism is an ideal state and an ongoing process where a person is able to feel comfortable in and communicate effectively with people from many cultures and in many situations. Identities, self-concepts, outlooks, and value formation transcends cultural considerations and the people become very open to new experiences. According to Hoopes Intercultural Learning Process model, there are several stages that a person needs to go through from the state of ethnocentrism to multiculturalism (as cited in Komives, 1998, pp. 146-147).

The first stage is ethnocentrism where one believes that his/her culture or way of doing things is best or superior to others. People operating at this stage can be intolerant and even hostile to others from different cultures or backgrounds. But, as experience expands and learning about other cultures happens, people may become aware of the differences and try to slowly move out of ethnocentrism. As awareness about multiple cultures is raised, an understanding is developed. This is considered a low level achievement in the learning continuum for it does not bring about any felt changes in a person but merely a cognitive processing of information without much internalization.

Nevertheless, these two transition stages of awareness and understanding can be stepping stones for developing a willingness to accept and respect the cultural perspectives of others. Accepting and valuing the cultures of others is a step beyond tolerance and has a lot of scope for admiring and incorporating certain aspects of other cultures into one's own life. This stage of selectively adopting values or aspects of other cultures and integrating into ones own life out of admiration and choice can lead to the next stage of multiculturalism. This is not a final state but an ongoing process where a person feels comfortable in learning about and appreciating other cultures and is very open to new experiences and growth.

The growth and transition of students from one stage to the other requires carefully designed multicultural curriculum and culturally responsive instructional techniques. Since true multicultural education is transformative in nature, it cannot be an additive to the existing curriculum or content but has to be conceptualized and implemented broadly (Banks and Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2002). This will need a more holistic approach that may require the restructuring of the existing curriculum and pedagogical practices. It has been suggested that a comprehensive implementation of multicultural education will have to focus on the (a) content integration process where teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations and theories in a particular subject area or discipline; (b) the knowledge construction process that relates to the extent to which teachers help students understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed; (c) the practice of equity pedagogy whereby teachers modify their teaching in ways that facilitate the academic achievements of students from diverse racial, cultural, and social class groups that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles of multiple groups; (d) prejudice reduction process that focuses on the characteristics of students' racial attitudes and how they can be modified by teaching methods and materials; and (e) by creating an empowering school culture and social structure that may allow full participation of all students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in every aspect of school life (Banks and McGee Banks, 2004).

Such practices would need culturally responsive leaders and culturally responsive teachers who can envision multiculturalism as the major focus and develop strategies that would lead to the creation of a culturally responsive teaching-learning organization.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Implementation of multiculturalism that may bring about integration and harmony among the different racial groups is the ultimate goal of the Vision Schools (Ministry of education, 1995). But this cannot be attained just by focusing into one or two aspects of the school such as the formalized curriculum or the sharing of the physical amenities and facilities. What is needed here is a holistic approach which may reform the total school environment to implement multicultural education that may eventually lead to social justice and racial integration.

At the school level, two powerful agents or groups of people who could play pivotal role in establishing the school as a social system that may enhance multiculturalism in all sectors of the school are the school heads and the teachers. While

the school heads play the role of 'culturally responsive leaders' who create the environment for the practice of multiculturalism, the teachers can perform their duties as 'culturally responsive instructors' designing and developing curriculum content and instructional methods appropriate for multicultural education. Together they can be major contributing factors in promoting 'culturally responsive teaching and learning' at the Vision Schools.

Based on the above arguments, the objective of this study was to investigate the extent to which the school heads and teachers were creating a multicultural environment that would promote multiculturalism in the Vision School. Specifically, it aimed to explore the perspectives and practices employed by the school heads and the teachers and the larger contextual factors that influenced their efforts towards the practice of multiculturalism in the Vision School.

Research Questions

The current study commenced on the premise that school leadership and teacher understanding of the policy implementation are the crucial elements in the successful establishment of any new school design. For the purpose of focusing data collection to address the issues underlying the implementation of the Vision School policy, three directional questions were drafted:

1. What are the headmasters' and teachers' perspective with regard to creation of a culturally responsive environment for racial integration?

2. How have the instructional practices and processes been reconstructed to serve the interest and objectives of the Vision School?

3. What do the headmasters and teachers perceive as supporting or hindering the progress of the Vision School policy towards creating a multicultural environment?

METHOD

This study which is exploratory in nature was conducted using the qualitative method that allowed deep peering into the heart of the issues surrounding the practice of multicultural education, the role of principals, and the contextual factors that influenced their performance in promoting culturally responsive teaching and learning. This approach was also adopted for it was intensive, provided holistic description, and allowed space for the exploration of the 'Vision School' within its real-life context.

Research Site

Out of the six Vision Schools in peninsular Malaysia, *Sekolah Wawasan Sinar Emas*, was selected as the research site. This was selected for it has successfully managed to house all three schools, namely, the Kurnia national primary school which is mainly conducted in the Malay medium, the Haojing National Type Chinese primary school, and the Ananda National Type Tamil primary school in one compound. It was also reputed as one of the successful Vision School in the country.

Respondents

The respondents for the study were selected based on the purposeful (maximal variation) sampling technique that allowed selection of informants from a diverse group, who would best answer the research questions and help develop multiple and diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2005). The respondents included all three heads of the three schools in the Lotus Park Vision School, their three deputies, and nine teachers (three from each school), all of whom were willing to vocalize their ideas and perspectives.

Types of Data Collected

The Data for this study was collected through multiple interviews, direct and participant observation, and document analysis. The open-ended interviews, based on a portfolio of semi-structured questions designed to probe into the leadership functions and processes was helpful in eliciting more information from the subjects. Observations of selected events, programs, and projects were recorded as field notes. Valuable insights captured during the observations were written in the form of memos. Various official documents and Ministry of Education circulars related to vision school policies and procedures were studied and analyzed.

Interviews

For this study, a total of 21 semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. All the formal interviews were audio tape-recorded, while the informal conversations were written down in personal note book during and after the conversations/meetings with the respondents.

Since the headmasters were the main focus of this study, intensive interviews were conducted with the heads of the S.K. Kurnia, SRJK (C) Haojing, and SRJK (T) Ananda primary schools. The actual interviews for the headmasters were very much organized around the major research questions and a number of sub-questions. In most instances, the questions for the interviews were developed spontaneously based upon the responses given by the headmasters. It was a process of continuous creation and evolution of questions specific to the contexts.

Interviews were also conducted with teachers in the vision schools to learn about their perspectives on Vision Schools. A total of 17 teachers from the three primary schools housed in the Sekolah Wawasan Sinar Jaya were interviewed. The teachers were mainly engaged in discussions related to the definition of multiculturalism, the teaching-learning practices that promoted the practice of multicultural education at their schools, and the support provided by their headmasters in creating conditions necessary for the practice of culturally responsive teaching and learning.

Direct and participant observation

Both direct and participant observations were conducted for this study. The purpose of the observations was to look for certain clues, signs, practices that might indicate multicultural teaching-learning climate in the schools. Observations were carried out of morning assemblies, meetings, co-curricular activities, and the casual conduct of teacher and student relationships. In the class room, which was planned one in each medium school for a full period of thirty five minutes, the observation aimed to pick out instructional strategies and practices, and talking points that reflected multicultural

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notions. There was also an opportunity to be a part of the annual teachers' day celebration, annual sports event, and a Hindu harvest festival (*Thai Ponggal*) celebration. All of the observations were mainly intended to supplement to the interview data (Creswell, 2005). Other sources of data collection included school magazines, special reports on school profiles, reports on school activities, minutes of the various subject panel meetings, and staff meetings. A so-called policy document of the Vision School and a concept paper on it made available in the Lotus Park Vision School were also analyzed.

School and policy documents

In addition to conducting interviews and observations at both the schools, documents related to Vision School policy and concept papers from the schools and the Ministry of Education, Malaysia were also collected. The school documents collected include 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 attending the schools, history of the school, and the principals' biographical information, work experience, academic and professional backgrounds, and their professional duties at school. Policy documents from the ministry include the concept paper on Vision School.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

The data collected from the three schools situated in the Sekolah Wawasan Sinar Emas compound - S.K Kurnia, SRJK (C) Haojing, and SRJK (T) Ananda, were analyzed case by case followed by a cross-case analysis. The analysis revealed that they were not meeting up to the objectives. The Vision Schools were not in any way different from the regular schools except the physical layout and better facilities.

The analysis of data assembled from the interviews, observations and perusal of documents from the Lotus Park Vision School was compounded through three levels of coding namely descriptive, topical and analytic (Morse & Richards, 2002). In the descriptive coding data was sorted according to the individual schools. It was then cross-analyzed and re-categorized under topical coding. Finally, the analytic coding helped to shape up all of the data under a number of themes, which eventually helped to unfold the underlying story. Evidently the headmasters, deputies and teachers perceived the Vision School policy as a timely and ambitious proposition. But, there were a number of loopholes in its implementation, which might have risen from a lack of understanding of the nature of the policy and inadequate preparation for the conditions of implementation. In all probability, the policy makers did not carry out necessary research on the policy and its implementation. Presumably, the architects of the policy did not see that it involved the ideology of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism that required special ways of dealing with. Hence, they failed to invest enough time, energy and possibly money for the formulation of a comprehensive policy taking into consideration the different stages of policy cycle and their deliverables, identification of critical success factors, and a meticulous implementation plan that looked at the content, process and people contributions. Naturally, the level of activities and energy and change on the ground were much less than expected.

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As the analytic coding of data revealed, there were six emergent themes of the key points that were interpreted accordingly: headmasters' understanding, teacher knowledge, curriculum, pedagogical practices, and instructional materials and text books. They might as well be identified as the critical action domains for the current policy implementation.

Headmasters' understanding

The headmasters of the three schools housed inside the campus of the Lotus Park Vision School appreciated the ideals of the Vision School, but were not able to interpret the vision / mission or strategies supporting its implementation, which were essentially to bring about racial integration among the students. They seemed to project merely a task mentality and often repeated the descriptive statements found in the Vision School Report by the Ministry of Education, such as the sharing of the field, the auditorium, and the school canteen/cafeteria. All three of them could not enter into an intellectual discourse on the policy. For them the physical sharing was all there was to Vision School. They believed that the physical proximity allowed by the sharing of the facilities would provide the necessary space and opportunity for the students from the different ethnicity-based member schools to mingle around and have conversations among themselves, which could happen during the recesses, and after school activities and games. It was like creating a simulated social environment where the students could get to know and befriend with one another. Their contention was that the opportunity and freedom given to students to befriend one another would in the long run create the right conditions for cultural co-existence and social integration. They did not realize that they were making a marginal representation of what the Vision School stood for ideologically. It was difficult to anticipate the assumed belief would have the power and rigor of a mission and vision to engineer a fundamental transformation of culture within an organizational setting.

A number of reasons could be attributed for the lack of comprehension, competence and commitment on the part of the headmasters towards the Vision School. They boiled down to one truth that is they were not adequately, if not thoroughly, prepared as the leaders of the Vision School movement. The headmasters admitted that they were not aware of the real nature or immensity of the task for which the Vision School has been enacted. Technically they knew what they were supposed to do in the course of their job in managing their school and the areas they had to co-operate with the others. There was no common agenda where the three headmasters would sit and sort things out together. In short, they knew they were the headmasters in the Vision School set up but had no idea of what under girded the changes they were expected to make. When asked if they received any official briefing or training prior to becoming part of the Vision School, they said they were briefed about their appointment and responsibilities. They did not talk about any seminar or workshop. One of them explained:

Just before I was posted here as the headmaster, I was told briefly about the Vision School concept in general and some information about the administration and operations of the three schools as separate identities. I was also told that some of the events will be done together and try to cooperate with each other.

Another headmaster reiterated the same point:

teachers. One very important aspect of cultural education would be providing counseling services to students who experience psychological disturbance by new inputs of ideology. Apparently, there was none among the teachers who could fulfill the role of a culturally responsive counselor.

It was also pointed out by the teachers that neither the State nor District education authorities conducted any seminars or briefing session to inform them about the Vision School. When asked if the authorities from the State or District department came to observe their teaching sessions they responded negatively. For them, it was a mere relocation to a new building with a new concept, but had no idea of what was expected of them. For them life was still the same in the new place. In the words of one teacher:

> We are in dark with regard to the vision and mission of the Vision School. Most of us do not know in which way our Vision School differs from the regular schools except the plan of the building and the organization of the three schools in the same compound. Otherwise everything- the curriculum, textbooks that we use, instructional activities, teaching strategies etc. are the same as in any other regular schools. What is supposed to be different, I am not so sure.

Another teacher expressed her views with some frustration:

> The Ministry has spent a lot of money in putting up this Vision School campus, but I am skeptical about the benefits. What are we supposed to be doing here? I heard it as 'racial integration' as the main objective, but I do not see any specific or sustained effort that would lead to this ambition. As teachers we do not collaborate or jointly organize educational or co-curricular activities. We are very much on our own.

Talking to the teachers it could be discerned that many of them sincerely valued the idea of the Vision School and revealed personal motivation to contribute to its success. They could discuss sensibly about the dynamics of the Vision School and social integration. Perhaps, the faith they bore towards the new initiative in the hope of the intangible benefits they anticipated from it, and the untaken measures by the relevant authorities made them feel frustrated, which was obvious in their body language.

Curriculum

The curriculum of course is the heart of any educational reform. It will spin off the necessary changes in all the other critical action domains so that the network of transformation will be complete. When examined, the curriculum for the various standards of the Vision School offered no particular difference from those of the regular schools. Apparently, no work was done to cater for the needs of the Vision School aims and objective. Perhaps a separate special subject would have served the purpose to some extent but there was none of the sort. The Senior Assistant for academics at the Kurnia National Primary School stated:

The curriculum or syllabus for the primary school is not specially designed for the Vision Schools. And I do not see any special content emphasizing intercultural or multicultural elements. As far as I know, it is the same as the regular schools that we have in Malaysia. No difference or nothing new.

However, although not provided in the curriculum, one positive move that was endorsed in the Lotus Park Vision School towards sponsoring social integration was the staging of select cultural functions within the school premises such as the Chinese lion dance and the traditional Tamil *Ponggal* celebration (harvest festival). But, then, they were just isolated events. There was no effort on the part of the Vision School leadership or staff to capitalize on the events as learning experience for the students. There was no curricular interest to make the events of cultural celebrations as possible teachable points of view, when students might listen, talk and discuss openly about them. One of the senior teachers of the Ananda Tamil School commented:

Last year we celebrated the Tamil harvest festival 'Ponggal.' Some students from the Chinese and Malay school represented their schools. They had a great time witnessing the event and the Tamil cultural show that followed. But it stopped there. There was no opportunity to explain or discuss about the event and the reasons behind the celebration.

During the interviews of the teachers, they also shared a consensus view that changes ought to be incorporated into appropriate curriculum to provide the cultural contexts for the celebrations that were allowed in the Vision School as well as other cultural norms and practices. Then the teachers would be able to design class sessions and lessons to support culturally responsive learning.

Pedagogical practices

Observations of classroom instruction and interviews with teachers at Lotus Park Vision School revealed that there were no special pedagogical interventions to help students understand the concepts of race, religion and culture and how they varied from people to people. Sitting in for observation of the three teaching sessions, it was not difficult to conclude that they did not seek opportunities for and deliberate cultural learning. They did not make any cross cultural references nor cite others' life experiences as examples to explain concepts and principles, which meant that there was no paradigm of multicultural notions among teachers. When asked one teacher explained, "I teach the same way here as I was teaching in my previous schools. I was not asked or told to teach differently for the kids here. After all, the content is the same, so I continue using the same old teaching strategies."

The irony of the situation was that during the observation of the teaching sessions it did not seem impossible for the teachers to formulate teaching strategies that would engage the students to reflect or touch on cultural notions and diversity. The only obstacle seemed to be the lack of ability or the intention to do so. For example, teachers could bring over students from the other ethnicity-based schools to talk about certain

ideas or practices; students could be asked prepare scrap books on one another's cultural norms.

Instructional materials and textbooks

An examination of the instructional materials and textbooks also revealed that another of the key policy tool was not properly undertaken. They were devoid of any information of sorts on cultural diversity or multiculturalism. Neither the contents of textbooks nor any of the activity sheets used by the teachers exhibited any element of cultural reference that could raise questions and discussion of racial understanding among students. In the Malaysian schools, religious study for the Muslim and moral education for the non-Muslim students have been introduced. Recently, a civics and citizenship course has also been introduced across the board. However, they do not seem to provide significantly an informational platform for the indulgence of teaching-learning in the areas of multiculturalism.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the analysis of data obtained from the interviews, observations, purview of various documents related to the Vision School initiative, and curricular and instructional materials, it was possible to deduce that the Lotus Park Vision School was not "really" in line with the objective of prompting racial integration or harmonization at the school level. Since its establishment in mid 2002, it has not made much progress in terms of cultural change or cultural responsiveness of its people both staff and students. A cross-check with a few of the other Vision Schools in the country revealed that a status quo to that of the Lotus Park Vision School was being maintained in all of them. Evidently, the slug in the Vision School's incompetent showing laid in the conceptualization and implementation of the policy by the school principals and the teachers.

This study on Vision School, highlights a number of inadequacies in the policy implementation processes and suggests some recommendations. From the findings of the study, it became obvious that the school community, i.e. the principals as well as the teachers of the Vision School under study do not possess clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the Vision School and the ways to go about achieving its aspirations. They have some information from the Ministry of education, but not detailed enough to guide them or help them alter their practices or bring about changes in their administration, instructional practices, and community relationship.

Principals as the leaders can play key roles in the implementation processes provided that they possess the knowledge and skills in the area of policy implementation, change management, and human development. These competencies can be used in the critical aspects of curriculum, instructional materials, pedagogical applications, assessment, and teacher development that can lead towards the creation of a culturally responsive school (Figure 1).
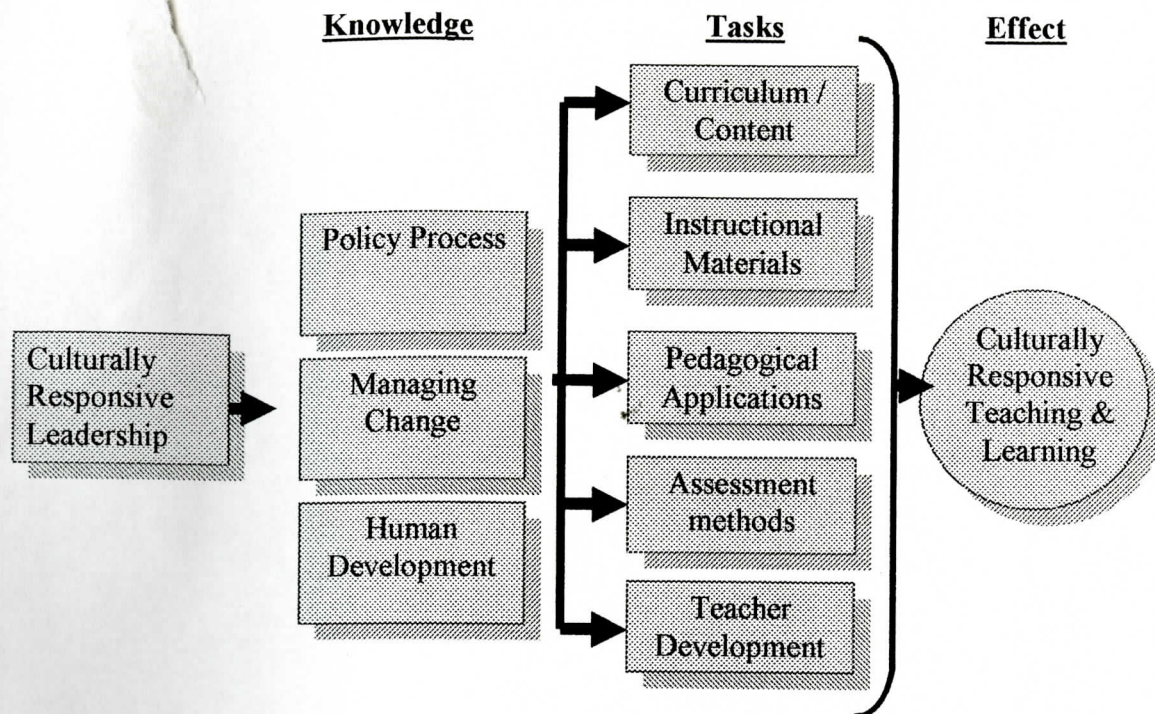
Figure 1: Leadership for Culturally Responsive Schools

Based on the study, three recommendations can be made. Serious attention should be paid to
1. Principal recruitment and selection processes
2. Principal capacity building and professional development
3. Principal accountability and evaluation procedures

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