

***Practice of Multiculturalism Among the  
Malaysian Teachers:  
An Issue of Competency and Contexts***

By:

**Suseela Malakolunthu**

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## **Practice of Multiculturalism among the Malaysian Teachers: An Issue of Competency and Contexts <sup>1</sup>**

Suseela Malakolunthu  
Department of Educational Management, Planning, and Policy  
Faculty of Education  
University of Malaya  
E-mail: [suseela@um.edu.my](mailto:suseela@um.edu.my)

### **The Inquiry**

In a diverse nation like Malaysia education is seen by many as a viable avenue for promoting racial integration and cultural pluralism. One of the major objectives of the Ministry of Education under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) is to strengthen the national (public) schools. One of the strategies to strengthen the national public schools is by bringing pupils of all races under the national public school system where the Malay language is used as the major medium of instruction. While the government aspires to bring all into the national schools, more and more parents of Chinese and Indian origin tend to enroll their children in the vernacular schools offering classes either in Mandarin or Tamil (a south Indian language).

As of December 2007, 94.8 % of the children of Chinese origin in the elementary school age group are enrolled in the Mandarin schools, and 55.4 % of the children of the Indian origin are enrolled in the Tamil schools (personal interview with an officer in the Ministry of Education, February 2008). A decade ago, this was not the case and there was a good balance in the enrollment figures. Why this drastic shift or drift away from the national schools? Why is there a change in the trend in student enrolment in the national schools and increasing number of pupils in the vernacular schools? While there may be many reasons for the dwindling number of student enrolment and the losing popularity of the national schools, one possible reason could be due to the lack of a multicultural environment or ethos at schools. Parents from the multiracial, multiethnic, multi-religious backgrounds in Malaysia may be interested in sending their children to schools where they could learn in an environment that celebrates diversity and provides multicultural experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft and the ideas are still being strengthened.

Among the numerous factors that may be responsible for the exodus of children, teachers' awareness, understanding, and disposition towards multiculturalism can be a key determinant in the practice of multicultural education at schools. Thus, it may be important to understand and explain the mind set (attitudes, dispositions, and perceptions) of teachers and their practices with regard to culturally responsive teaching and learning at schools.

Also the literature search done so far has indicated that very little work has been done in the Malaysian context with regard to the practice of multiculturalism and multicultural education in the schools. As far as the practice of multiculturalism at school is concerned, there is a gap in knowledge.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Multicultural education can be defined as a structured process designed to foster understanding, acceptance, and constructive relations among students. It should provide space for students to see different cultures as a source of learning and to respect diversity in the local, national, and international environment. According to Banks and McGee Banks (2004), multicultural education is a broad concept and can be achieved if the following important dimensions are taken into consideration in the teaching-learning process. The dimensions include (1) content integration, (2) the knowledge construction process, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) an equity pedagogy, and (5) an empowering school culture. All these different components are important domains of teacher knowledge and practice and these can only become a reality if teachers understand the basic tenets of multiculturalism and its processes.

There are also several stages through which an individual need to go through in order to achieve the level of multiculturalism. According to the Hoopes Intercultural Learning Process model (Figure 1), it is a continuous learning process that starts with being ethnocentric – thinking that one's own culture is the best, and then becoming aware of other people's cultures, understanding others, and eventually respecting, appreciating, and valuing the cultures of others (as cited in Komives, 1998). The move from the state of ethnocentrism to multiculturalism is an important developmental experience and is an important element in the practice of multicultural education.

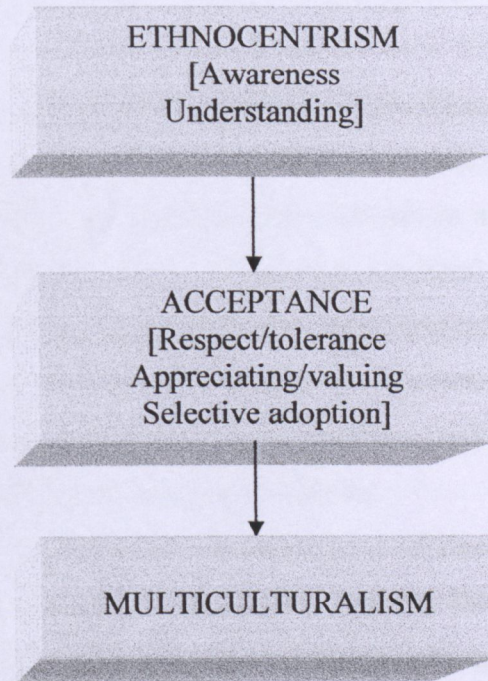


Figure 1: Adapted from Hoopes Intercultural Learning Process Model

It is imperative that teachers know where they are in this intercultural learning process ladder and develop their cross-cultural understanding and intercultural maturity. The information about the teachers' level with regard to their intercultural position and understanding will enable the policy makers and teacher educators to pay attention to including the multicultural component in the teacher preparation or professional development curriculum and producing culturally responsive teachers for the national schools.

Teachers well nurtured in the ideals of multiculturalism should be able to help students appreciate one's own culture and at the same time understand that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another. It should be able to elevate a student from the state of ethnocentrism to multiculturalism - which is an ideal state and an ongoing process that takes a student from the lowest stages of ethnocentrism where one views one's own culture and traditions as the only best one in the world to different stages of understanding, accepting, respecting, appreciating, and finally affirming other peoples' cultures and practices (Babtiste, 2002; Komives, 1998; Nieto, 2002). This form of shift

will require teachers well grounded in the “transformative” approach to multicultural education.

### **Research Objectives and Questions**

Implementation of multicultural education is a crucial element that can pave way to inter-ethnic understanding and healthy race relations in a multicultural society like Malaysia. Among the various aspects of education, teachers’ awareness, understanding, and disposition towards multiculturalism are key determinants in the practice of multicultural education at schools. Thus it may be important to understand and explain the mind set of teachers and their attitudes, dispositions, and perceptions with regard to culturally responsive teaching and learning at schools.

Based on the above arguments, the objectives of this study is to investigate the awareness and attitude of teachers in schools towards the practice of multicultural education. Specifically, this study aims to understand and explain the teachers’ mindset, beliefs, disposition, and perceptions towards multiculturalism. Hence, the research questions that frame this study are as follow:

1. What are the teachers’ perceptions toward diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom?
2. How is the teachers’ preparation or professional development with regard to the practice of multiculturalism in classrooms?
3. What are the contextual factors that limit teachers’ practice of multiculturalism in schools?

### **Method**

This study which is descriptive and exploratory in nature, used the mixed method approach to elicit information. A survey was conducted to understand teachers’ degree of multicultural awareness. Interviews and observations were also done to gather first hand information about the contextual issues that limit teachers’ practice of multiculturalism in the classrooms.

### **Instrumentation**

The study was conducted using the Multicultural Awareness Questionnaire (MAQ) developed by Yassar Bodur (2003) based on the original work of Joe Ponterotto.

The original MAQ had 43 items and for the purposes of this study among the Malaysian teachers, some items perceived to be not relevant were removed, and some new items deemed necessary for the local contexts were added to the list. The final number of items in the Malaysian version of the MAQ was 37. This process of elimination and addition of items was an important one for this questionnaire was originally developed to use in the study of preservice teachers' learning of multiculturalism in the United States. And the items had to be scrutinized carefully for contextual differences, cultural bias, and changed to suit the study of the Malaysian inservice teachers' experiences of multiculturalism.

In addition to the survey instrument, interviews were also conducted with selected teachers to gain in-depth understanding of the topic under study and developed insights with regard to the teachers' multicultural practices and the influence of the contextual factors. For triangulation purposes observations were also done in selected schools to note the existing practices of multiculturalism in the classroom teaching, and its impact on racial integration, harmony, and coexistence among students.

### **Sampling**

Sampling of the population and data collection were done on the basis of systematic representation and randomization rather than convenience. Since this study was focused on multiculturalism and the practice of multicultural education, it was important to ensure that the state and the schools selected do reflect a multiracial and multicultural background. The subjects who participated in this study include both primary and secondary school teachers teaching in the state of Perak in Malaysia. This state was particularly selected for historical reasons. Since the British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this state of Perak has been the center of attraction among the immigrants and has served as the administrative capital of the British East India Company. Due to its legacy, it has a good mix of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian races that is representative of the Malaysian population. A total of 181 teachers participated in this study. Out of this, 105 (58%) teachers are of the Malay origin, 39 (21.5) teachers of the Chinese origin, 36 (19.9%) teachers of the Indian origin, and one teacher (0.6%) belong to the 'others' category.

## Findings

One of the key questions in the instrument was “Have you received any training on multiculturalism.” For this question, out of the total number of 181 teachers, 167 (92%) teachers have reported that they have not received any form of training related to multiculturalism or diversity. Only 13 of them (7.2%) have reported that they have received some form of exposure or training on multiculturalism. This is an important figure that indicates the degree of importance given to teachers’ awareness and practice of multiculturalism among the Malaysian school teachers.

Among the 37 items on multicultural awareness, ten items with the highest means were identified and rank-ordered (see Table 1). The ten items with the highest mean values were further categorized. The first two items with the highest mean values were related to the importance of exposing students to different cultures. Teachers participated in the study are fully aware that it is important that their students know about the cultures that differ from their own, and they believe that students should be exposed to a variety of cultures.

The next three items with high mean values are about teachers and their role in teaching students about different cultures. As teachers, they want to be able to teach students about different ethnic groups, different cultures, and bring everyone into the cultural mainstream as envisioned by the Malaysian education system.

The next four items with high mean values in Table 1 are all about teachers’ need for training to improve their competencies in designing and delivering instruction to students on multicultural perspectives in an efficient manner. They strongly indicated that they need training or professional learning in ways to teach students with different cultural backgrounds, ways of bringing other cultures into the classroom, in evaluating the educational achievements of students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and in identifying and evaluating culturally diverse materials for use in the classroom.

One final item in the top ten list is the one on “insufficient time to fit all of that learning about different cultures into the school day”. It is important to pay attention the time factor as well.

**Table 1: Major Multicultural Awareness Elements**

Rank Order	Multicultural Elements	Mean (N=181)	SD
1	Students need to know about cultures that differ from their own.	4.2597	.5617
2	Students should be exposed to a variety of cultures in and out of the classroom.	4.1436	.6594
3	As a teacher, I want to teach my students about different ethnic groups.	4.1381	.7584
4	As a teacher, I want to teach my students about different cultures.	4.1105	.8089
5	One of the goals of Malaysian education is to bring everyone into the cultural mainstream.	3.9834	.7635
6	I would like to receive more training in ways to teach students with different cultural backgrounds.	3.9724	.8971
7	I would like to receive more training in ways to bring other cultures into the classroom.	3.9503	.9145
8	I would like to receive more training in evaluating the educational achievements of students from culturally diverse backgrounds.	3.9171	.8874
9	I believe learning about different cultures is important, but there isn't time to fit all of that into the school day.	3.9006	.7895
10	I would like to receive more training in identifying and evaluating culturally diverse materials for use in the classroom.	3.8564	.8441

From the top ten items, it is understood that teachers who participated in the study are:

1. aware of the importance of multiculturalism and are keenly in favor of exposing teaching their students about different cultures, ethnic groups, and their practices;
2. willing to teach students about different cultures, ethnic groups, and help them learn to live together;
3. in need of more training and development to improve their teaching, evaluation, and materials development capacities to impart knowledge on diverse cultures and ethnicity; and
4. constrained by insufficient time and mental space to think through, plan, and implement instructional activities that may promote student learning about different cultures, and act as culturally responsive teachers.

## Discussion

Understanding diversity and the practice of multicultural education are important steps in the promotion of multiculturalism that would lead towards racial coexistence among the children of the multiethnic/multiracial Malaysian society. Firstly, the success of the nation's dream to promote multiculturalism and unity depends very much on the teacher competency and practice. Teachers can play a crucial role in achieving the aims and objectives of the nation's vision and aspirations provided that they are given the right exposure on multiculturalism during their pre-service program, continuous training and development during the in-service days. Teacher professional development that is focused on helping them learn to teach diversity and practice multiculturalism across curriculum will put them in good position to become culturally responsive teachers.

Secondly, the contexts in which teachers perform cannot be neglected. Teachers with the right administrative support system and leadership would be motivated to improve their practice of culturally responsive instruction. In other words, there is the need for redesigning the school organization in terms of its culture, structure, and policy (that are clearly aimed at fostering multiculturalism. Culture – It is important to clarify school's vision that values the practice of multiculturalism, and confronting differences and diversities openly and acting to resolve them through the use of shared values. Structure - It is crucial that teachers are provided with autonomy in making decisions related to multicultural practices, altering working conditions that may allow teachers to have collaborative planning time and to seek out information needed for planning and designing instruction, and for professional dialogue and network. Policy – Human resource management practices that may include the hiring of teachers, appraisal of teachers, teacher evaluation, teacher development, etc. are focused on the practice of multiculturalism.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. In a multiracial society such as Malaysia, the practice of multiculturalism at schools is becoming crucial. And this can be promoted via discussions and dialogue between teachers coming from different racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds. But discussion about race or religion can be a sensitive issue. Under such circumstances, how do we start dialogues that would allow teachers to openly discuss issues related to race relations and religion?
2. The journey from ethnocentrism to multiculturalism is a long process. As such, what are the best ways in which teachers can be educated so that their consciousness elevated and competencies developed?
3. Racial polarization is a common scenario in Malaysian schools. This is also extended into institutions of higher learning. What kind of approaches/strategies/policies can be implemented to overcome this issue?
4. Redesigning the school in terms of its culture, structure, and policy are important to institutionalize culturally responsive teaching and learning. Suggest how changes can be made with regard to the (a) culture, (b) structure, and (c) policy.

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