Multicultural education as a reform initiative: alignment of critical success domains

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Abstract: *In the multicultural Malaysia, a new school model called the "Vision School" (Sekolah Wawasan) was established to foster racial coexistence and cultural pluralism among students. The Vision Schools would house all the three major vernacular (Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil) elementary schools in the same compound sharing common physical facilities and events. A qualitative study of selected Vision Schools highlights that the lofty idea of student integration for unity cannot be attained merely by physical reorganization or sporadic joint events. Successful implementation of multicultural education, just as any educational reform initiative, will require the coherent alignment of several critical action domains. And these could include principal leadership, teacher professional development, curriculum framework, pedagogical strategies, instructional materials and textbooks, and assessment. It is essential that these critical action domains are well aligned with the multicultural education initiative and aptly incorporated in the detailing process of the Vision School policy development processes.*

Keywords: *multicultural education, critical success domains, policy alignment, principal leadership, teacher professional development, curriculum framework, pedagogical strategies*

1.   Introduction

Malaysia is a nation diverse in its ethnicity, culture, and religion. Its multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-religious nature poses unique challenges to the government in keeping the Malaysian people united. Since independence in 1957, the Malaysian government through its various education policies has been trying to promote racial integration and unity among its multiracial population. One such effort was the Vision School concept that was introduced in 1995. Realizing the importance of schools as the common grounds for bringing together the children of different ethnicity, race, and language, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has come up with the idea of creating "Vision Schools" *(Sekolah Wawasan)* that would house all three – Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil – medium schools in the same compound or school campus.

Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1995-2000), seven Vision Schools were planned to be established throughout Malaysia as pilot projects (Education in Malaysia, 2001). As of today, only six schools were reported to be operating as Vision Schools. Among these six schools only one school is in its full operation as a Vision School where all three schools (the National Malay, and the National type Chinese and the National type Tamil schools) are functioning in one compound or campus as outlined by the Ministry of Education. All the other five Vision Schools only house the Malay and Tamil schools.
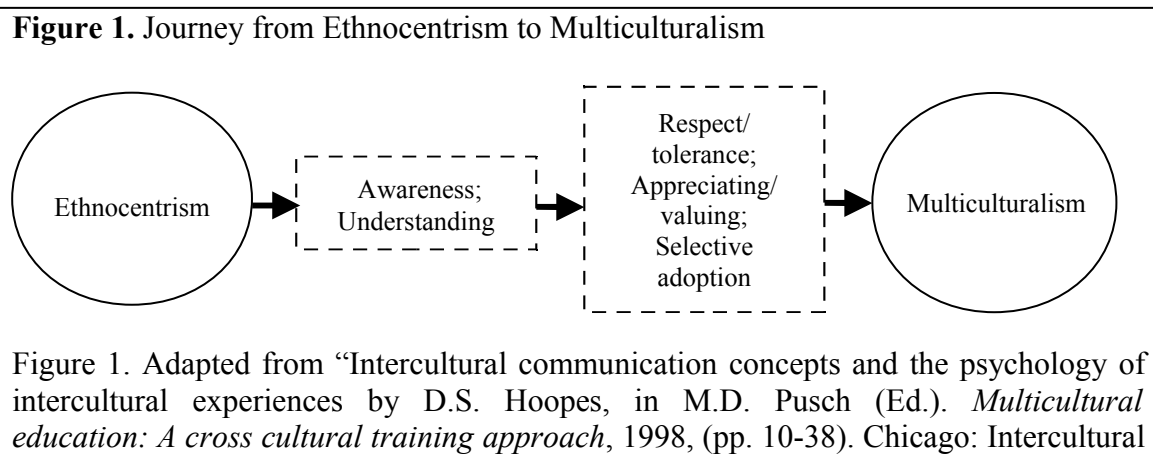
The aim of the Vision School concept is to foster racial integration, harmony and unity among the different ethnic/racial groups (Ministry of education, 1995). And this is going to be achieved via an existing common curriculum, sharing of common amenities and physical facilities such as the field, multi-purpose hall, cafeteria, etc. and celebration of cultural events and festivals. But it is not clear to what extent the provision of a formalized common curriculum or the sharing of the physical amenities and facilities, and the celebration of national holidays are sufficient to result in racial integration and harmony among the students and help build a united Malaysian citizenry for the future.

In any reform initiative such as the Vision School redesign project, in addition to infrastructural innovations and physical changes, there is always a need for a reorganization and alignment of the various policy tools or critical action domains such as the curriculum framework, instructional materials, mode of assessment, and teacher professional development that would suit the new demands and expectations (Malakolunthu, 2009; O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). And such a systemic approach which can reform the total school environment to implement multicultural education that may eventually lead to social justice and racial integration may also require changes in the leadership mindset or philosophical orientation and thus the operation mechanisms of the Vision School.

Based on the above arguments, this paper sets out to examine the extent to which the existing Vision School model is effective in realizing the objectives of fostering racial integration and unity among the multiracial students and the specific challenges and constraints it is faced with. Firstly, this paper discusses multicultural education and the processes of multiculturalism that is used as the framework to understand the current practices of the Vision School practices. Secondly, it provides the analysis and discussion of the findings of the study in selected Vision Schools. Finally, it presents the various critical action domains or policy action tools that must be aligned in order to bring forth systemic changes in the operations of the Vision School to promote multicultural education and the practice of multiculturalism among students.

Multicultural Education

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. Multicultural education should be able to help students understand 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). And this can be achieved through a well developed multicultural curriculum that organizes concepts around contributions and perspectives of several different groups and cultures Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Powell, 2001). And the content developed can be based on the various stages prescribed in the Hoopes Intercultural Learning model which prescribes the journey from the state of ethnocentrism to multiculturalism can be used as taxonomy for multicultural development (Hoopes, 1979; Komives, 1998). The various stages in the multiculturalism process students go through are important steps in developing their cross-cultural understanding and intercultural maturity (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Journey from Ethnocentrism to Multiculturalism

Figure 1. Adapted from "Intercultural communication concepts and the psychology of intercultural experiences by D.S. Hoopes, in M.D. Pusch (Ed.). *Multicultural education: A cross cultural training approach*, 1998, (pp. 10-38). Chicago: Intercultural Press.

True multicultural education is transformative in nature, and this will need a more holistic approach that may require the restructuring of the existing curriculum and pedagogical practices. Therefore, aspects related to multiculturalism cannot be an 'add on' to the existing curriculum or content but has to be conceptualized and implemented broadly (Banks & Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2002). It has also 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 & Banks, 2004).

Multicultural education when constructed carefully and implemented well, can pave way for self expression, open dialogue, critical thinking, and analysis of alternative viewpoints among students (Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Multicultural education that emphasizes the learning about the history, traditions, and cultural practices of one's own culture and the others can help students feel comfortable to communicate effectively with people from many cultures and in many situations thus overcoming the feeling of alienation and isolation. When done effectively, multicultural educational practices can help students transcend identities, self-concept, and outlooks about life and thus create attitudes that may make them more open to new experiences and help students develop multiple perspectives (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Powell, 2001). And these practices would need carefully crafted culturally responsive education policies and well implemented practices. All those involved in the process will have to be engaged in the development of curriculum and strategies that would lead to the creation of a culturally responsive teaching-learning organization.

2. Method

During the period of 2005-2006, inquiry was launched to gauge the status and achievement of selected Vision Schools in the country. Ministry of education, Malaysia had initiated and established Vision Schools around the country to bring about integration and harmony among the different ethnic/racial groups via formalized curriculum and the sharing of physical amenities and facilities. But this was considered as an over simplistic solution for a complex issue such as racial integration.

At the school level, there are a number of aspects/factors that need to be taken into consideration in order to bring about systemic change with regard to multicultural education. These may include principal leadership, teacher preparation, curriculum, instructional materials, assessment, etc. All these aspects/factors play a crucial role in the systemic implementation processes of the Vision School policy. Based on this premise, the investigation was carried out to identify the different aspects/factors and evaluate the extent to which they influence the practice of multicultural education in the Vision Schools. In other words, it was an attempt to understand the various practices and processes in the Vision Schools that were designed to achieve racial integration or multiculturalism.

Three Vision Schools (one with the Malay, Mandarin and Tamil vernacular schools, and the other two with only the Malay and Tamil vernacular schools) situated in a common compound were selected as the research sites for the study. This gives a total number of seven vernacular schools situated in three Vision Schools. All principals of the seven vernacular schools and selected teachers participated as respondents.

Data was collected via in-depth interviews, observations of classrooms and select school events, and analysis of related documents. Data collected via interviews was transcribed and categorized according to emerging themes (Morse & Richards, 2002). Observations of classroom instructions, special cultural and religions events, and school co-curricular activities were captured in the forms of field notes and memos. Documents such as the Vision School concept paper, school vision mission statements, minutes of meetings were also compiled for analysis.

3. Findings and Discussions

The analysis of data from the 'Vision Schools' indicated that the goal of racial integration or harmonization is not happening as anticipated for the approach taken to implement the 'Vision School' is fallacious with shortfall in the multicultural education policy formulation and implementation stages. The 'constant comparative' analysis of data from multiple sources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and the cross-case analysis of data (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1989) from selected Vision Schools provided evidence that there is little sign of multicultural education practices. There was the false impression that the school people (principals and teachers) were doing some joint activities such as the cultural celebrations and school events and that would be sufficient to bring about racial integration.

The analytic coding procedure based on the data derived from the in-depth interviews and observations provided a number of emergent themes which assisted in identifying the key or critical action domains. For any large scale reform or transformation endeavor, there is action domains or policy tools deemed as critical, need to be taken into account for the achievement of necessary results (Malakolunthu, 2009). In the case of the Vision School study, they were identified as (a) principals' understanding, (b) teachers' knowledge, (c) curriculum frameworks, (d) pedagogical methods, (e) instructional materials and

textbooks, and (f) assessment (Figure 1). It is essential that these critical success domains are in coherence with the multicultural education policy of the 'Vision School' and incorporated in the detailing process of the Vision School policy development. This is crucial for successful implementation of multicultural education reform initiative in the Vision Schools.

Figure 2. Critical Action Domains for Culturally Responsive Instruction
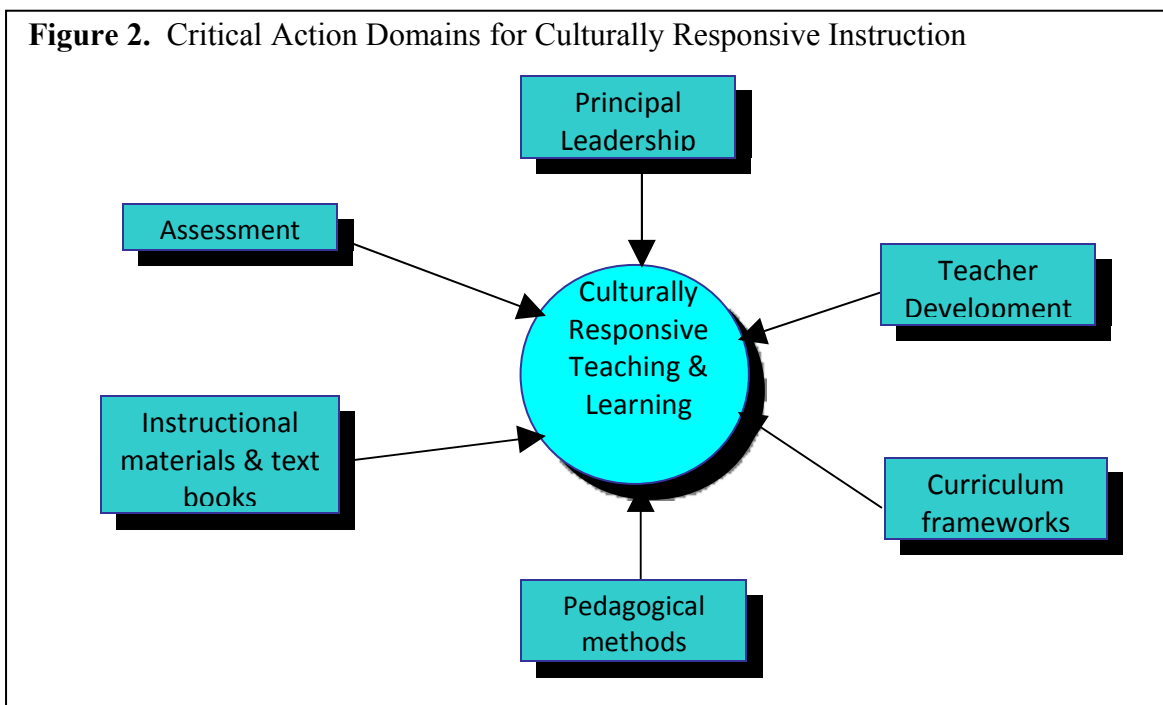
Principal Leadership

Vision School leaders require certain competencies that may allow them to successfully implement multicultural education. They need to possess the knowledge, skills, and the right kind of attitude or mindset to develop and implement school policies and practices that would promote multiculturalism. Firstly, they need to possess a knowledge base that is strongly grounded in the ideals of multiculturalism such as equity, social justice, equal opportunity, and cultural pluralism. And these can shape the personal values, beliefs, and principles and become the basis for the development of a vision and setting the directions, and building strategies for establishing multicultural education across curriculum.

Secondly, the leaders who wish to implement multicultural education should be familiar with human resource development. People development is a crucial element of organization building, and in this case the processes of induction, orientation, and on-going professional development of staff members in accordance with the multicultural practices will make the dream of a multicultural school, a reality. The competency in human resources will also assist in the recruitment and selection of teachers who will serve in the school.

Thirdly, the Vision School principals should build the multicultural school culture through the processes of collaborative learning, sharing of ideas, and having open dialogue about the issues surrounding race, ethnicity, and social class differences. And the organization structural redesigning activities would include the provision of time and mental space for teacher learning, performance appraisal and staff evaluation that focuses on the practice of multicultural education, and more community and parent participation in the school development programs.

Culturally responsive leaders' ability to apply the core competencies of a clear vision and mission, human resource development, and organization structuring of the various operational tasks of developing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, selection of textbooks and materials, choice of assessment techniques, teacher professional development, teacher recruitment and selection, and the promotion of parent/ community involvement strategies would enhance culturally responsive instruction.

Teacher Professional Development

Teachers are key players in any educational reform implementation. Their knowledge and understanding of the practice of multicultural education will determine the success of the multicultural education programs. Therefore, it becomes crucial that attention is paid towards developing teachers' motivation and competency in the area of multiculturalism. Teachers can be provided with multiple avenues of professional development to support their learning and internalizing of the culturally responsive instructional practices. For instance, through teacher collaboration groups and teacher professional networks, teachers can be encouraged to think and talk openly about issues related to race, class, and equity issues. Such teacher collaborations reduce isolation between diverse groups and create a willingness to engage in positive discussion about differences through full and active participation among teachers. In addition to these, specially designed multicultural workshops will also provide them with the opportunities to delve into the issues of race and culture at schools and help them create a more equitable and non-biased learning environment for their students from diverse groups.

Professional development for teachers need to be comprehensive in such a way that it brings about change in teachers' mind set, help them make changes in their existing teaching/instructional practices, introduce positive changes in the classroom management styles in alignment with the presence of diverse students, and select instructional materials suitable for diverse students needs. Research has found that students from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to respond differently to teachers' instructional cues (Heath ,1983), and may benefit if instruction is adapted to build on the norms, values, knowledge, skills and discourse patterns that is associated with their backgrounds (Brisk, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Landau, 2004). So, it becomes crucial that teacher development programs are carefully crafted to include the knowledge of learners from diverse backgrounds and their multicultural contexts in the teacher professional development agenda.

The thorough grounding of teacher knowledge in the processes of multiculturalism and the multiple ways of connecting the multicultural content into daily lessons should be a priority for this effort can turn them into culturally responsive educators and thus multicultural education a reality.

Curriculum Framework

Most often, multicultural education is reduced to occasional inclusion of multicultural perspectives in the curriculum (Powell, 2001). Many educators believe that celebrating cultural events and conducting special activities related to specific cultural or ethnic groups will be sufficient to proclaim as offering multicultural education. And some believe that the sporadic interspersing of bits of information about ethnic groups or cultural elements is teaching multiculturalism. Such an approach is more an additive in nature and does not bring about any major transformation with regard to understanding and valuing the histories and experiences of other cultures (Banks & Banks, 1995; 2004; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1992). It becomes important to understand the differences in the 'additive' versus 'transformative' approaches, and take the content of the multicultural curriculum from the

mere lower level of information on the history and experiences of the other cultures to the level of understanding, respecting, valuing, and accepting the histories and experiences of the diverse populations (Banks & Banks, 2004).

Multicultural curriculum should be more sophisticated and inclusive of every group. Most importantly, ensuring that all details given must be accurate and complete, and all stories told from diverse perspectives as experienced by every group. It is also necessary that multicultural content be developed throughout disciplines or across disciplines; incorporate a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in the curriculum; and transform the canon, ultimately developing new paradigms for the curriculum (Banks, 2003; Banks & Banks, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2003).

Pedagogical Strategies

Multicultural education in the true sense needs to practice student-centered pedagogy that would bring the experiences of students to the fore, make learning more active, interactive, and engaging. Such a practice would create more opportunities for the participation and active learning of every student in the class. Teachers' pedagogy should be equitable and flexible to allow for diversity of learning styles of students. Instruction should respect students, their language and culture (Banks & Banks, 2004). Emphasis should be put on critical and creative thinking, learning skills, and awakening the deep social awareness in students. In this way, it becomes possible to encourage and instill multiple perspectives and shared inquiry among students. Good pedagogical practices build on students' learning styles, adapt to students' skill levels, and involve students actively in thinking and analyzing. Instruction can also be made more effective with the use of cooperative learning methods, collaboration, and teamwork that pave way for sharing and caring.

Teaching-learning environment should be conducive for the practice of multicultural education. It is important that every aspect of a classroom environment – the sounds, the smells, and the feelings reflect the diverse composition of the student population. Most importantly, the classroom has to be a place where all children from diverse backgrounds are made to feel comfortable and at ease, a place where there is mutual respect in a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere, a place where every child can bloom to the best of his/her ability. The creation and sustenance of such an environment will make every child feel free and open to express their views and share their emotions.

Instructional Materials and Text Books

Text books, instructional materials, and visual displays should be free of race, ethnicity, gender, and disability stereotypes and include members of all groups in a positive manner. Educational materials must be inclusive of not only the physical aspects of the diverse population but also their voices and perspectives that may pave way for critical analysis and deeper understanding of every group. The materials that are used should be attractive and cater to the developmental needs of every child from diverse backgrounds. The teaching-learning materials exhibited in the classroom should serve to reinforce the concept of multiculturalism, should act as catalysts in initiating thought provoking discussion around multiculturalism, should motivate and raise the students' awareness about equity and social justice, and instill pride and self esteem in every child.

Assessment

A school that is multicultural interested in addressing the educational needs of students from all kinds of cultural backgrounds will have to answer the question such as: Why assess? What to assess? How to assess? When to assess? Where to assess? These questions are important for they will provide the guidance in determining the content and forms of assessment, and the needs for offering variety of ways to assess students. Learners from multicultural backgrounds bring with them different sorts of cultural baggage with multiple meanings and multiple perspectives that are socially constructed. Therefore, an equitable assessment should include the preparation of assessment materials and methods that can be inclusive of all students. This is crucial for creating a just and non-biased assessment that is not based on rational ways that assume objective measures and measurable outcomes, but in holistic ways that take into account the health and well being of students and society as a whole (Furman and Shields, 2005).

4. Conclusion

The implementation of educational initiative such as the Vision School for racial integration or harmonization cannot be achieved by merely focusing on the physical reorganization and the conduct of a few select joint events. It is crucial to note that the journey of taking students from ethnocentrism to multiculturalism is long and involves complex teaching-learning dynamics. Successful implementation of multicultural education initiatives will need the principal leadership to execute the change process and teacher competencies in the area of teaching multiculturalism. And at the same time all the other policy domains involved in the processes of student learning and transformation such as the curriculum framework, pedagogical strategies, instructional materials and textbooks, and assessment should also be well coordinated. It is essential that these critical action domains are well aligned with the multicultural education initiative and aptly incorporated in the detailing process of the Vision School policy implementation procedure.

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