

Multi-Ethnic Tolerance in Visual Arts Education: Teachers' Experiences with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is developed based on cultural knowledge, the experiences of not just students but also teachers from different ethnic backgrounds, their references and performances in learning and teaching. The present case study examines the experiences of Visual Arts Education teachers in a public school in Malaysia with the aim of identifying and understanding their perception of culturally responsive teaching. Findings showed that the teachers empathised towards cultural differences, and believed that professional training for young teachers may help in creating more culturally tolerant students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive, ethnic backgrounds, improve creativity, tolerance, Visual Art Education

INTRODUCTION

In multi-ethnic Malaysia, unity and tolerance are important and one of the ways to foster these is through implement an educational policy which acknowledges Malaysia's

diverse cultural values. This is a qualitative study on how Visual Arts Education foster multi-ethnic tolerance among the students. It examines the role of teachers in achieving this. The findings showed challenges for Visual Arts Education teachers in fostering multi-ethnic tolerance are the nonchalant attitude towards visual arts education, ethno-centric grouping and the time fringe in completing the syllabus.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

Some local researches include those conducted by Najeemah (2005, 2008),

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Raihanah (2009a, 2009b), Hamdan, Ghafar and Ghani (2010), Malakolunthu, Saedah and Rengasamy (2010), Malakolunthu (2011) as well as Ahmad, Abiddin, Jelas, and Saleha (2011).

There have been many studies on education in multicultural societies looking at the role of higher education in fostering unity in Malaysia. Among them are Najeemah (2005, 2008), Raihanah (2009a, 2009b), Hamdan, Ghafar and Ghani (2010), Malakolunthu, Saedah and Rengasamy (2010), Malakolunthu (2011) as well as Ahmad, Abiddin, Jelas and Saleha (2011). This study looks at the development of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogical (CRP) Module for Visual Art Education for secondary school students in Malaysia. Findings of this study will help enhance the curriculum in Visual Art Education (VAE). Through culturally responsive teaching, teachers can incorporate elements of culture or art from other ethnic groups in their lessons. This will inculcate greater sensitivity and tolerance among students of different backgrounds and cultures.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research Objectives

This research examines VAE teachers' perception of culturally responsive teaching including their personal experiences in practising CRP.

METHODS

This qualitative study obtained data from interviews with five experienced teachers

with and a classroom observation of a visual arts education teacher who has 17 years of teaching experience in a public school. Purposive sampling technique was used and recordings of conversations were transcribed before they were analysed. Analysis includes locating and listing the statements of meaning into units followed by structural descriptions and the overall experience of the teachers. The general description was then sub categorised using statements and meaning units.

Interview

Five experienced visual art education teachers were recruited for this study using the Purposive Sampling method.. The selection of research participants was also motivated by several factors which included the teachers' experience in teaching students from different ethnic backgrounds.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Awareness and Responsiveness in Multicultural Education

Overall, results from the interview with all the VAE teachers indicated that they have the necessary knowledge and greater awareness of the importance of multicultural education . Unfortunately, their knowledge of other ethnic groups is limited by their own admission. Respondent 1 was rather perplexed in providing her understanding of multiculturalism: "*So erm ... Multicultural is the diversity in terms of culture and aa ... maybe in terms of the lifestyle.*" Additionally, according to

Respondent 2; “*So...multicultural education is not something new.... It's just that in Malaysia we are less exposed about the education of variety of culture.... which is...multicultural education.*” Despite admitting that multiculturalism is not new, the second respondent admitted that it is not well presented in the curriculum. The third respondent understood that multicultural education involves learning about the various cultures customs and beliefs. However, he remarked – “*...There are so many communities in Malaysia...but we indeed do not know much about their culture and arts...most arts and crafts are about Malay.*” Fakhri (2012) suggested that the government is responsible in ensuring the promotion of tolerance within a culturally diverse society via education. Thus, there is a need to identify various cultures in Malaysia and include them in the curriculum through appropriate teacher training programmes.

However, respondents reported that despite their lack of awareness and knowledge of multiculturalism their personal experiences with it at the social level, proved to be valuable in the classroom. Respondent 4 said; “*It's just that I got to know here and there maybe because the place where I was born which is Penang, there are a variety of culture so I could actually observe it through the interaction with friends of other races.*” Respondent 3 also remarked that her personal experiences living in a multicultural and multiracial neighbourhood were very helpful in her teaching. She was introduced to various beliefs and customs of others

during her primary and secondary schooling. This is in line with Fakhri's (2012) opinion that students must be given the opportunity to reflect on their educational experience beyond the curriculum.

Knowledge, Trainings and Foreign Influences in Multicultural Education

The respondents admitted that their formal training only provided restricted knowledge and skills on multicultural education. Admitting to this shortcoming, Respondent 4 expressed the fact that: “*I was never exposed formally about multicultural education when I studied in the university.*” This was also true for Respondent 5: “*It is true...I admit I did not get formal education about multicultural education.*” Regardless of their limited knowledge of multiculturalism, these teachers did they make efforts to learn multicultural values through their social environment especially from the schools where they used to attend, and at the university where they received their trainings. According to Respondent 1 “*I think I learned a lot from our neighbourhood...the neighbours...non-Malay friends...just look at their ways of life and their celebrations like Deepavali... Chinese New Year...how do they celebrate right...there are lots of colours...from there I learned a little bit about their culture, I think all of us are like that.*” Thus, it is clear that most people are exposed to multiculturalism informally or through social experiences. Hamza and Hahn (2012) believed that when teachers put their personal experiences, professional skills, and content into practice,

it will make teaching and learning more meaningful.

The teachers highlighted that when they were at university, no courses were offered which specifically addressed education in a multicultural setting. For instance, Respondent 2 explained that; *“If you say in ...err...courses, in courses there are none. I knew about it in university. For Visual Arts course, there is none that focuses on multicultural issue...If I am not mistaken in methodology subjects or teaching approaches...however there is not much of it is incorporated in these subjects...for example in approaches we only touch on it just a little bit...and that is more towards the foreign countries school system like the US. There are one or two courses that mention multicultural education. However, there is no specific course by itself.”* This is similar to what was experienced by Respondent 5 who said that *“when I was in the teacher training college...err...I learned a lot from my friends of other races about their customs...but when in university there was none about our local communities.”* This shows that teachers may entirely depend on their informal or social experiences to teach in a multicultural setting. However, Hamza and Hahn (2012) highlighted that this could be useful in promoting cultural tolerance based on real-life setting and experiences.

The VAE teachers highlighted that their experiences while at university or teacher training college mostly centred on multicultural issues in other countries and not so much on Malaysia. Even so, multiculturalism was never introduced as a

complete course; instead, it was discussed as a supplementary content for the various courses offered. Respondent 4 explained that *“I do not think I learned about multicultural education per se, but in EDU subjects there are a little bit about it...I mean education subjects...As far as I can remember there are no specific courses teaching about multicultural...there were not much...but there were a lot about overseas education... we did not discuss about the situation in Malaysia...”*. Respondent 3 also mentioned that *“... there are less exposure about... the various elements of a variety of culture especially in our own communities...”*. This scenario must be factored in by curriculum developers at university and teacher training colleges because trainee teachers need to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to not only teach but to bridge cultural differences in the Malaysian classrooms. Hence, Fakhri (2012) asserted that the government and policy makers have to take up the role as custodian of a just educational system that can promote unity especially in a multicultural setting through appropriate curriculum strategies.

According to Respondent 5: *“... usually if we observe in the university, we get to learn a lot of culture originated from foreign countries such as the Western culture and Southeast Asia...Okay, there are not so much focus to err...the contents err...the culture in our country. If there is, it is not discussed widely meaning it is not discussed err...not thoroughly err...so obvious. Okay, err...I think most of the contents that we learned err at university most of them were*

taken from the foreign countries.” This further proves that curriculum developers for teacher training programmes need to consider their content to introduce transcontinental cultural elements but to also include domestic cultural values and elements in the development of CRP. This was discussed by Brown-Jaffey and Cooper (2011) who suggested that the diversity in local culture has to be appropriately addressed not only because it is essential but also to allow students to embrace cultural variations.

Respondent 4 felt that additional readings or field trips are important to boost acceptance of cultural differences. However, Respondent 5 raised a concern that: “...sometimes it is difficult to relate with our country’s school situation...” which indicates that certain forms of trainings and preparation are indispensable because elements of other cultural values are foreign to them and the link to the Malaysian multicultural setting is tenuous at best. classrooms. Therefore, as Donkor (2011) asserted that appropriate training is not only essential in dispersing knowledge but it to empower teachers to introduce a culturally tolerant learning environment .

Teachers’ Professional Preparation for CRP

The VAE teachers who were interviewed in this study suggested that policy makers should consider establishing a curriculum focused on multicultural education not only from the transcontinental perspective but most importantly from the Malaysian

context to provide trainee teachers with the appropriate skills. The teachers felt that such move may be able to boost their skills in the CRP process which in turn would improve their ability to conduct effective classroom sessions.

Domestic multicultural content should be given priority when developing a culturally responsive pedagogical module. Respondent 1 put forth that: “... *it is necessary, necessary to have exposure about the multicultural education*”. The same respondent believes that “... *It is important, because aside from one community, ...the Malay community, we also have the Chinese and the Indians, and also the ethnics that are famous with the wood carving such as Sabah and Sarawak where we can see their uniqueness.*” The respondent further highlighted the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in equipping teachers with the appropriate skills when teaching in a multicultural setting. Respondent 1 asserted that “... *For the teachers they need to have knowledge about multicultural education because it is very important...They teach in a class with the Malay students, Indians and Chinese so the teachers must know about their culture...because all are different... Hence the teachers need to be alert...That’s why the university should do something so that the new teacher will be prepared with this kind of situation later...*”. The respondents emphasised on the need to be alert of cultural differences which also suggested that they have to be diplomatic and tactful when dealing with multicultural issues. Barnes (2006) opined that when

teachers are attentive and perceptive of their social surroundings, such attitude would give positive impact to teaching and learning.

Since teachers are considered as the classroom ambassador for culturally responsive individual, this also depend on the trainings they receive. Respondent 4 recounted that “... *all universities and training colleges should have subjects about multicultural education to the future teachers...so that they would be more open...with issues that involve multicultural students...*”. Importantly, the trainings should prepare them to handle issues pertaining to home ground as related by Respondent 2 who believes that “... *it is necessary to have a subject that teaches multicultural education in Malaysia context...let the future teachers have the exposure on how to be prepared in order to teach students with different backgrounds... religions, beliefs and culture... There are lots of issues need to be clarified to the future teachers regarding the diversity of culture in Malaysia...*”. Respondent 4 feels that “... *as teachers we have to be sensitive... especially when there are discipline cases or fights that involve students with different races...teachers have to be rational... you cannot be biased...*”. Respondent 2 also believes that appropriate training for teachers involved in multicultural education is a burning yard stick because “... *The teachers also need to be sensitive with the students' backgrounds and culture...*”. In her research, Faizah (2014) found that teachers are empowered when they are well prepared

and received training prior to teaching in a culturally responsive classroom while developing profound understanding of cultural differences. Therefore, culturally responsive pedagogy is vital for teacher training programmes.

Teachers Experiences in Teaching VAE to Multi-ethnic and Multi-cultural Classrooms

The interview with the VAE teachers brought out the essence of their experiences in teaching students of various ethnic identities. These teachers claimed they were proactive in their efforts in teaching VAE by making necessary alteration in their classroom approaches to promote student interests during teaching and learning process.

In encouraging multicultural appreciation among students, one of the VAE teachers admitted that he gives students absolute freedom to explore the diverse arts and craft. However, Respondent 3 still cautioned about following the curriculum content as closely as possible: “*when I first teach I did depend on what is in the curriculum specification...but soon I see that the students were bored...they only did Malay crafts...since then I told myself... something needs to be changed...it will be difficult for me to teach them...it is difficult to teach if the students are uninterested and bored...*” and this calls for the teacher to instantly change his or her approach which includes exploring art forms of other cultures and simultaneously find the uniqueness so it could be presented to the

students. This is what Faizah (2014) termed as a sample of hybrid activities that can intensify a culturally tolerant classroom experience.

The VAE teachers would also vary their approaches in getting feedback from students through art criticism. Students would showcase their presentation and art criticism on traditional craft demonstrating knowledge of their own cultural roots. Some of these are narrated by the teachers. Respondent 1 and Respondent 3 said they would give their students ‘freedom’ to explore the arts belonging to other cultures and that of their own. Respondent 3 for instance, would “*give them (students) leniency to explore the cultural and motive uniqueness...symbols from their own community in the class...*”. Despite giving freedom to the students in exploring the arts and craft independently, he still is cautious in his teaching plans: “*I still teach them the craft in the syllabus...it’s just that...err...if...when teaching about carvings...I let them carve the motives that they want...use colours that are close to their culture*”. This is very valuable as Barnes (2006) contended that such strategy is authentic effort and demonstrates culturally responsive teaching. Although giving students the freedom to do their own extended research, it is also important that teachers present the curriculum to guide the students.

The respondents also allowed their students to also discover the intricacies of their individual cultural heritage. Brown-Jeffrey and Cooper (2011) suggested that when teachers allow students to explore

not only their own culture but also that of others, it allows motivation for learning and intensify their cultural sensitivity and recognise other cultures. This was admitted by Respondent 4: “*I gave my students a lot of freedom...for them to explore their culture...only then they (students) will feel excited doing art activities in the class...*”. Respondent 4 also believes in teaching “*according to the Visual Arts syllabus such as when doing sculptures...such as sculpture or carvings...but I will give chance(s) to the students to create pieces or arts that are related to the students...I do not force them to create Malays (arts)...*”. Most importantly, she also does not believe in coercion when teaching arts.

Another relevant approach to teaching arts is to be a proactive teacher. This is clearly expressed by Respondent 2: “*...Actually the process of teaching and learning of Visual Arts depends on the creativity of the teacher...knowledge and also the teacher’s hardwork and diligence...*”. Not only that, the respondent also encourages students to discuss among themselves and to initiate their own art production. She adds that “*If possible we incorporate the multicultural elements in the class discussion...such as the intended meaning for a colour or symbol...let the students talk...We can also do art production activities that focuses on a certain race...For example...the painting of the lion dance or...the painting of henna decorating and motives...In that activity we can include all students...Possible for group work too...Let them talk...discussing about the motives...and the meanings...*”.

Ultimately, Respondent 2 also believes in ensuring learning arts is a vibrant because, *“It is fun to sometimes modify the activity so that the students would not be bored... do not always follow what is included in the syllabus...As a teacher, me myself is bored when I only teach the same thing over and over again...”*. At least two respondents appreciated the creativity inherent in arts as well as making learning ‘fun’ for teachers and students which may contribute to tolerance.

CONCLUSION

The feedback from the teachers in this study revealed that despite content specifications in teaching and learning Visual Arts Education, teachers take proactive measures to ensure that students learn the art craft from other cultures. The level of teachers’ knowledge and awareness of multicultural education may be limited to whatever was discussed during training but nevertheless, they make efforts to equip themselves for real classroom situations. The teachers implement multicultural learning regardless of whether the classrooms are mono-ethnic or that there are only a handful of students from other ethnic groups. It needs to be emphasised that the teachers put to use whatever knowledge they gained from the trainings they received and adapted their approaches by considering backgrounds of their students. Therefore, the suggestion by Abdul Razaq et al. (2011) for the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) to reorient the curriculum to accept diversity. As

Martin (2006) suggested, arts is central to multicultural education.

In view of the teachers’ suggestion of professional preparation to teach students with diverse cultural background, it is hoped that policy makers in teacher training institutes would enhance the curriculum with more multicultural content. The teachers who participated in this study highlighted that most contents discussed are lacking a Malaysian context. Therefore, it is timely that efforts are made to improve multicultural content in schools. It is worthy to highlight that a study showed that VAE trainee teacher (Mamur, 2012) were inquisitive in efforts to better understand multicultural content and in providing meaning for their artwork. Mamur (2012) also identified that the trainee teachers developed their knowledge and skills by learning through experiences and their social surrounding. This is also consistent with the findings of current study.

For effective multicultural education, Malakolunthu (2011) recommended sustained efforts especially in the areas of developing teachers’ professionalism, improving the curriculum, enhancing pedagogical strategies, giving a face lift to the teaching and learning materials in use, and topping off the evaluation process. Teachers who participated in the present study admitted that they took personal initiatives to improve their pedagogical strategies utilising the knowledge and skills they learnt at university. However, they suggested better trainings for multicultural

education which can improve classroom learning while enhancing their knowledge and skills. Teachers not only learn arts and craft of other ethnic groups with and from their students but they also learn to immerse themselves in the multi-socio setting. This transcends the Malaysia Education Philosophy which has been upheld since its inception in 1988.

Although findings indicate a promising future in multicultural education in the VAE classrooms, further development must be given due consideration by the Ministry of Education in efforts to strengthen multicultural education to greater level. Suggestions by Abdul Razaq et al. (2011) should be considered especially in terms of finding suitable mechanisms to promote diversity in schools. This would subsequently enrich student experiences in schools with regards to multi-ethnic learning, especially, in Malaysia which has diverse ethnic groups and culture.

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