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**ADDRESSING LEARNER DIVERSITY BY CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE
PEDAGOGY**

Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum, Nooreiny Maarof, Manisah Mohd Ali

ABSTRACT

Malaysian school classrooms are characterized by its diversity whereby students (Malay Chinese, Indian and other ethnic groups) come from various cultural backgrounds. Studies have shown that culture influences the learning process and social adjustment of students. Providing culturally appropriate practice is one of the main concerns of the teaching profession. To do that teachers need to be able to promote cultural understanding to enable students to become sensitive to other students from other cultures and to eventually be able to live harmoniously in a multicultural community. They need to be multi-culturally aware of differences among students to better act as role models in classroom. The objective of this paper is to describe the effect of a multicultural competence workshop in raising a group of 128 primary school teachers' awareness about multiculturalism in the classroom. Multicultural competence comprises multicultural awareness (how people's attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions, self-awareness affect the ways they interact with those who are culturally different from themselves), knowledge (informed understanding of cultures that are different from one's own culture) and skills (skills individuals use to engage in effective and meaningful interactions with those who are from different cultural backgrounds). The training workshop employs three main activities (a) self-awareness, (b) awareness of Malaysian cultures and (c) instructional strategies and resources. The qualitative data reveals that the teachers find that the workshop activities to be supportive of a culturally responsive pedagogy. These activities have helped them to be aware of their own thinking, biases and emotions towards diversity in the classroom. The activities of the workshop seem to have been facilitative in increasing the teachers' multicultural awareness and competency. It can be concluded that the teachers have positive responses to the workshop. The study indicates that teachers need to be exposed to multicultural activities that could assist them in implementing a culturally-responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: learner diversity; cultural responsive pedagogy; multiculturalism; teacher education; multicultural awareness

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian school classrooms are characterized by its diversity. Students come from various cultural backgrounds-Chinese, Indian, Malay and other ethnic groups. It is thus important for teachers to be culturally competent in pedagogy to address the diversity in the classroom such as the various learning styles of students. Research has shown that culture influences the learning process and social adjustment of students, and providing culturally appropriate practice is a main concern of the teaching profession (Robles de Melendez & Beck 2007). Teachers need to be able to promote cultural understanding in various ways to enable students to become sensitive to other students from other cultures and eventually are able to live harmoniously in the multicultural community (Nunan, 1999). Teachers themselves need to first be multi-culturally aware of differences among her/his students to better act as role models in the English classroom. In the USA, for instance, multicultural education is a critical component for the preparation of teachers and such preparations include an understanding of a variety of cultures (NCCTQ, 2007 cited in Hitchcock et al.). This need for training in multicultural competency for teachers is well-documented (e.g., Dieker, Voltz, & Epanchin, 2002; Prater, Wilder, & Dyches, 2008; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008 as cited in Hitchcock, et al. 2009).

Malaysia shares some of the basic tenets of multiculturalism although there are many differences in the concept as understood and practiced by Americans and Malaysians. But what is agreed upon is that culture plays an important role in learning (Au, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Over the decades, the definition of culture has changed from a narrow definition to a broader one. A broad definition of culture is “the shared learned meanings and behavior derived from living within a particular life activity” (Hitchcock et al., 2009, p. 2). Teachers thus deal with students, who are in the majority, of different beliefs and practices and who have different views of what or how learning and teaching should occur. Therefore, it is important that teachers are provided with assistance and knowledge on developing their multicultural competency to be able to meet the needs of her/his students in the ESL classroom.

This paper aims to describe the effect of a multicultural competence workshop in raising a group of 128 primary school teachers’ awareness about multiculturalism in the

classroom. Multicultural competence comprises multicultural awareness (how people's attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions, self-awareness affect the ways they interact with those who are culturally different from themselves), knowledge (informed understanding of cultures that are different from one's own culture) and skills (skills individuals use to engage in effective and meaningful interactions with those who are from different cultural backgrounds). The training workshop employs three main activities (a) self-awareness, (b) awareness of Malaysian cultures and (c) instructional strategies and resources.

TEACHER AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Multicultural education is not only reflecting the diversity of society, also to raise awareness towards inequality, discrimination, stereotypes caused by differences. Thus, teachers also act as social change agent to develop equitable and democratic society for all citizens. To meet this objective, teachers help students to develop critical and analytical thinking skills in a democratic classroom via discussion and dialogue (Banks & Banks, 2007). Banks et al. (2001: 6) suggest, "If teachers are to increase learning opportunities for all students, they must become knowledgeable about the cultural background of their students". Research showed that same knowledge should inform teachers' pedagogical and curricular decisions in the classroom so as disciplinary-based content knowledge is accessible to every student (Gay, 2000; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Moll & Gonzales, 2004; Sleeter, 2005; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton & Yamauchi, 2000).

Teachers' attitudes have direct implications and may determine the success or failure of multicultural education in schools. Teachers' perspectives and attitudes toward multiculturalism are manifested in areas like teacher-student interaction, attention provided to student, expectation on students' achievement, conflict resolution, teaching materials selection and many other aspects (Ambe, 2006; Banks & Banks, 2007; Fong & Sheets, 2004).

Teachers are not only responsible for delivering knowledge to their students but they also act as multicultural agents by helping students from different ethnic groups work together. As multicultural agents, teachers help students of diverse cultural backgrounds negotiate between home, school and community. Children in the urban areas bring to the classroom their unique experience of structural inequities around race, class, culture, abilities and language that permeate urban schools.

Teachers' multicultural awareness is the ability to teach students with various cultural backgrounds. In order to do multicultural teaching, teachers should have complex cultural, social and emotional awareness, sensitivity and knowledge in various fields and skills (Diller & Moule, 2005). Dukes and Ming (2006) also stressed on the role of teachers as multicultural agents. Ponterotto et al. (1998:1003) definition of multicultural awareness as,

... teachers' awareness of, comfort with, and sensitivity to issues of cultural pluralism in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers high in multicultural awareness see cultural diversity as a strength and feel the responsibility to address multicultural issues in the curriculum and in the teaching/learning process (1003).

Multicultural teaching competency is an important component in ensuring that the goals of multicultural education are achieved in a multiethnic and multiracial society such as Malaysia. Multicultural teaching competency is regarded as an on-going process where teachers examine their attitudes and beliefs concerning multiculturalism. In addition, these teachers could increase their understanding of the characteristics of the different cultures and evaluate the effects of their knowledge and beliefs on their teaching (Spanierman et al., 2010). Culturally relevant teaching has three observable criteria: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence and the development of a socio-political or critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995:483)

Some findings (Ambe, 2006; Finley, 2000; Hickling-Hudson & McMeniman, 1993; Swetnam, 2003) have highlighted the necessity to include and enrich multicultural contents in teacher training for both the pre-service and in-service teachers. Teachers need to possess knowledge, concepts and skills to teach effectively in diverse classroom and to foster students' multicultural awareness. According to Banks et. al (2001:6), teacher preparation programs should offer experiences that help student of teaching:

- a. Uncover and identify their personal attitudes towards racial, ethnic, language & cultural groups;
- b. Acquire knowledge about histories and cultures of the diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and language groups within the nation and within their schools;
- c. Become acquainted with the diverse perspectives that exist within different ethnic and cultural communities; and

- d. Understand the ways in which institutionalized knowledge within schools, universities and popular culture can perpetuate stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups.

Gay (2002:106) defined culturally responsive teaching ‘... as using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively’. There are five crucial elements of culturally responsive teaching. They include developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. In addition, Gay (2000) believed that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal and are learned more easily and thoroughly.

Culture encompassed numerous aspects which had direct implications for teaching and learning. They included ethnic groups’ cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions and relational patterns. Teachers needed to know how different ethnic groups gave priority to communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affected educational motivation, aspiration and task performance, ways of interacting between children and adults in instructional setting and gender socialization role in different ethnic groups. The knowledge that teachers knew about cultural diversity went beyond mere awareness of, respect for and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups had different values or express similar values in various ways.

Stockman, Boulton and Robinson (2008) conducted a study to describe the instructional strategies reported for multicultural/multilingual issues (MMI) education at programs in speech-language pathology and audiology and the perceived ease and effectiveness of doing so. A 49-item questionnaire was administered to 731 respondents (administrators, supervisors and instructors) at educational programs accredited by the American Speech Language-Hearing Association in the United States. Findings showed that respondents were generally committed to multicultural instruction, but they varied in their reported instructional practices and perceived level of preparedness, effectiveness and needs. General curricular infusion without and MMI dedicated course was the common instructional model used. Students were judged to be at least modestly prepared to deal with diversity issues as a result of their multicultural instruction. More

positive outcomes were reported by instructors of MMI dedicated than MMI non-dedicated courses. The study showed that the instructional models and strategies used for MMI education vary and programs are challenged by multiple issues in complying with the mandate for MMI curricular infusion. Sleeter (2001) called attention to the quality of MMI instruction as one of the reasons for teachers' poor preparedness to deal with diversity issues.

In their survey, Kea, Trent and Davis (2002) observed that 41 prospective African American teachers were more knowledgeable about African American children than about other groups. None scored at the highest level of preparation to teach about cultural diversity.

Talbot (2006) found that 31% (321) of a sample of student teachers reported that diversity was not covered in their professional education; 21% rated diversity coverage as low to very low and 40% rated it as moderately effective. In another study, Sogunro (2001) concluded in a survey of 31 Canadian teachers that although the intent of multicultural education was encouraged, 90% agreed that the pedagogical practices were inadequate for preparing teachers to deal with diversity issues.

Bales and Saffold (2011) presented the research findings of faculty who implemented a field based 'pedagogy lab' in an urban-focused, collaborative teacher education program. The lab offered teacher candidates deliberate opportunities to interrogate their ethnicity, gender and social class then used that knowledge to enhance various disciplinary-based instructional activities for PK-12 pupils. Findings suggested new ways of preparing teachers for the children attending urban schools.

Paccione's (2000) research found that racial-cultural diverse job situation in school provided an emergent awareness of diversity issues among teachers. Grootboom (2007) stated that a class composed of various students from different and diverse cultural background tended to have more social interaction problem due to the mixing of cultures. Thus, this was where the teacher played his role in developing the students' social skills.

Murrell (2000:339) stated that "to meet the needs of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse school population in America will require collaboration among schools of education, arts and sciences faculty in higher education, community stakeholders, parents and school personnel to prepare multiculturally competent teachers".

At preschool level, Rohaty Mohd Majzub and Salasiah Hashim's (2011) findings showed that despite a high level of teaching competency, further training is needed for these teachers in order to sustain and enhance multicultural competencies based on 136 responses of the adapted Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS).

METHOD

The study involved a training workshop comprising three main activities as part of the construct multicultural competence. The activities addressed: (a) self-awareness, (b) awareness of Malaysian cultures (Malay, Chinese, Indian and others), and (c) instructional strategies and resources (adapted from Hitchcock, Prater & Chang, 2009). A combination of open ended and closed ended questionnaire was used to gauge the effectiveness of the training workshop. The length of each workshop was approximately 3 hours excluding the refreshment breaks. For this paper, the qualitative section of the questionnaire were analysed using a content analysis approach.

FINDINGS

The analysis and interpretation of the data collected for this study including the demographic information of the respondents are elaborated in this section. The respondents for the study were 128 primary school teachers from 3 selected urban schools. Based on all respondents' teaching experience, 44.9% (53) have taught in a primary school for less than 10 years, 32.2% (38) for 10-19 years and 22.9% (27) for more than 20 years. Even though the samples are all primary schools, 10 teachers from all the three schools have taught in the secondary schools. 50% (5) of the respondents have taught in the secondary school for less than 10 years, 20% (2) for 10-19 years and 30% (2) for more than 20 years.

As most of the respondents were experienced teachers, 10.2 % (13) were more than 50 years old, 21.1% (27) were in the age range of between 41-50 years, 23.4% (30) were below 30 years old. The majority of the respondents 45.3% (58) were aged between 31-40 years old. 49.2% (63) respondents held a bachelor's degree in teaching and 50.8 % (65) had teaching certificate.

The teaching profession was still ‘monopolized’ by the female as 78.9% (101) of the respondents were female while only 21.1% (27) were male. The Malays were seen as the major ethnic group who chose teaching as their profession as seen in this study. 75% (9) of the respondents were Malays, followed by 12.5% (16) Chinese and 6.3% (8) Indians and others. When asked whether they have attended courses on multiculturalism, only 14.1% (18) answered in the affirmative while 85.9 % (110) had never attended any courses like this before.

Multicultural awareness

In the following section school teachers’ understanding and level of multicultural competence (MC) were examined. The study aimed to investigate whether the training workshop could help develop the teachers’ MC level and understanding.

Findings showed that the workshop attended by the teachers were able to develop their level of awareness and understanding of multicultural competence. These teachers understood the importance of being multi culturally aware in teaching in a diverse classroom. All of them agreed (100%) when they responded to the open ended questions in the form of reflection at the end of the post-questionnaire. In addition, the workshop has raised their awareness in terms of the strategies and approaches needed to teach in a multicultural classroom. 99.2% (127) indicated their agreement with this statement. All of them (100%) indicated that they were more aware of skills required of a multicultural competent teacher.

The final section discussed the effectiveness of the training workshop in developing the teachers’ MC. Based on the responses, 98.4% (126) agreed that the workshop had helped to further develop their multicultural proficiency to teach students from diverse backgrounds. These teachers felt that the workshop had ‘opened their eyes’ in terms of the need to be multi culturally competent when dealing with students from different backgrounds. A number of the teachers responded that the activities in the workshop provided a platform and opportunity for them to incorporate the idea of multiculturalism in their classes. Some of the comments reported by the teachers include:

- a. *Rekindle the memories of love, respect, of your surroundings (R2)*
- b. *The workshop was an eye opener for me. Now I will try my best to incorporate multicultural awareness amongst students. This will make them better understanding citizens and our country will be a better place to live in. (R27)*

- c. *Students in primary schools should be exposed to Multicultural way of learning in the formative years as this will help to form a society that will have a strong foundation of cultural awareness. (R42)*
- d. *This will help our Malaysian community discover cultural values and beliefs of the other races in our country. (R37)*
- e. *It is a good platform for the teachers to apply and absorb multicultural in learning session/classrooms. (R43)*
- f. *The workshop that I attended was interesting and knowledgeable. It gives me a greater awareness about the strategies, and approach needed to teach in a multi-ethnic classroom. I hope to use the methods learned to raise the awareness of the children. (R45)*

Based on the recorded comments by the teachers, it could be said that the workshop had helped raise their awareness for the need to promote a culturally responsive pedagogy in order to promote cultural diversity multiculturalism in education.

CONCLUSION

This finding suggests that the three activities of the workshop provided useful ways to increase cultural sensitivity and resources and teaching strategies. Teachers' approaches in promoting multicultural education required teachers' effort to integrate multicultural concepts and understanding in their lessons through the selection of teaching materials, collaborative discussions and application of cultural approach and historical approach. Further on, teachers act as good model to interact with students and staff with cultural sensitivity and equality.

Core values of multiculturalism such as tolerance, acceptance, respect, equality were emphasised in schools through their hidden curriculum and its implicit norms and values. Students developed their intercultural understanding in democratic setting where they were allowed to discuss, to voice up and to share their experiences and opinions. Multicultural education could promote and preserve cultural identity and diversity of all students and to ensure access and equality to learning opportunities.

The success of multicultural education needs full commitment from school leadership and support from government (Bank & Bank, 2007). Schools ensured the academic curriculum embrace multicultural understanding in their content and context.

These were done by providing second language course and integrate multicultural perspectives in different subjects.

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Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum, Nooreiny Maarof, Manisah Mohd Ali*
School of Language Studies & Linguistics,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi,
Selangor, 43600 Malaysia

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
Bangi, Selangor,
43600 Malaysia
Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
Bangi, Selangor,
43600 Malaysia

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6019-2833282; fax: +603-8925-4577.
E-mail address: tntm@ukm.my