

Strengthening relationship among multi-ethnic students in Malaysia

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The education system in Malaysia plays an important role in strengthening the relationship among multi-ethnic students. This article uses data drawn from interview session, observation and document analysis, which aim to identify strategies to strengthen relationship among multi-ethnic students in a secondary school. Through purposive sampling, two school administrators, seven teachers and twenty form four students from various ethnicities were selected. This study revealed that, there were four strategies such as nurturing national integration, encouraging interactions among multi-ethnic students, stimulating acceptance and tolerance between students and creating school environment that reflects diversity of ethnics. The present findings provide new evidence illustrating how a secondary school implemented various strategies to strengthen student relationship and a few recommendations were made.

Key words Diversity, multi-ethnic students, strategies, relationship, national unity, multicultural education, education policy, Malaysia

Introduction

In Malaysia, the populations are dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian, (Source: Population and housing census of Malaysia, 2000). Apart from that, we also have minorities group such as *Orang Asli* (indigenous) and other ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. There are many factors that contribute to the existence of multi-ethnic society such as migration, commercial activities, marriage, colonization era and formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1969. However, the dramatic changes in the composition of ethnics is very noticeable as a result of British rule in the early 19th century (Mahzan Arshad, 2002, Yasmin Ahmad & Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2010; Onwubiko, 2012; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2013). However, misunderstanding among different ethnic groups in the aspect of administrative, economy, education, language, religious and cultural sometimes cannot be evaded (Lai Fong Yang & Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, 2012).

There are many countries around the world with majority and minority groups such as United States of America, Netherlands, Australia, France and so on. In these

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countries the minority groups have to undergo assimilation process in many aspects of life. Usually the minority groups have to absorb and assimilate the natives' culture (Pratas, 2010). The assimilation processes strictly apply by certain countries to ensure the people's loyalty towards the government, establish unity and national identity among its people (Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 2011).

In Malaysia, before the arrival of Chinese and Indians, the majority group and the native people is the Malay ethnic. However, after the independence till now, there is no real majority or minority in terms of Malay, Chinese and Indians relations in Malaysia. The relationship among all ethnics in Malaysia is basically based on the acceptance and acknowledging of others' needs as stated in a social contract (Ezhar Taman, 2009). The most significant aspect was the agreement by the Malays to grant citizenship to the immigrant communities and in return, they agreed to special economic privileges for the Malays. This situation differs from the majority and minorities' relation in some of the Western countries.

Consequently the willingness to accept each other among ethnics group has produced no severe conflict in Malaysia so far, apart from the riot in May, 13 1969. Many countries faced continuous conflicts in their country, but not in Malaysia (Maznah Mohamad, 2005). What is more, based on the Global Peace Index, Malaysia is the most peaceful country and among Asia Pacific countries, Malaysia is ranked 4th ahead of Singapore, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia and Thailand (Source: The 2012 Global Peace Index, 2012)

Theoretical perspective of the research

Functional theory emphasized on the importance of every unit in society to play their function so that the stability of society can be maintained (Thio, 2000:13; Macionis, 2007:15; Schaefer, 2009:14-17). The functionalist perspective is based largely on the sociological works of prominent researchers in the field such as Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons. They argued that every unit, i.e., family, education, politics, economics and religion, that proposed and established by the society are to 'fit for purposes' (Sadovnik, Cookson & Seniel, 2006 p.20). In many cases their functions are mainly to maintain stability and continuity of society. In order to achieve these, functionalists suggested that every unit should be interconnected and work together in harmony to maintain an orderly state of balance, social equilibrium and homeostasis for the whole. In our context of study, the notion of balance or stability refers to harmonious relationship among multi-ethnic students in school. To achieve this, school should play its role effectively through appropriate measures. Since school is the first multi-ethnic environment that children encounter, so its function in strengthening relationship and maintaining unity cannot be denied.

As the country all around the world becomes a more culturally and ethnically diverse, schools are becoming more diverse too (Gomes & Holmberg, 2010). Definitely, students who attend schools with a diverse population can develop an understanding of students from different backgrounds and learn to function in a multicultural environment. The understanding of other ethnics only can be attained through continuous interaction among them (Sánchez-Martí & Ramírez-Iñiguez, 2012). So, it is mandatory for students to learn how to interact in a diverse environment, such as in multi-ethnic schools. For example, findings in Gonçalves (2011) study showed that frequent contacts between diverse students, help to reduce cultural barriers and prejudice and contribute to intercultural sensitivity and competence. Intercultural knowledge and understanding

others cannot be directly taught, but through continuous social interaction with one another in the classrooms (Sahlberg, 2010). For this reason, students from different ethnic backgrounds should be educated on how to communicate with each other without the influence of ethnic prejudice. The education system must be aware of this in order to accomplish a harmonious multi-cultural environment.

Even though the school is not restricted to one ethnic group, sometimes the segregation among ethnics group in schooling systems cannot be avoided and seems to be a problem in many countries. The ethnics' segregation in schools is strongly linked to segregation by class, residential segregation, free school choice and so on. Normally, students in integrated schools perform better on tests, possess elevated aspirations for educational attainment and lead more positive attitudes toward others (McKenzie & Purdy, 2010) compared to students in segregated schools. Not only that, segregation in school also impeded the relationship among multi-ethnic students (O'Nions, 2010). Since segregation result in negative impact, so one of the functions of education system is to overcome this problem.

Undoubtedly, a country which has majority and minority ethnics groups will face obstacles and challenges since every ethnic group has different demands in every aspects including schooling system. Ethnic groups are often referred to as "majority" or "minority". But whether the group is majority or minority depends on the numerical size of the group relative to other groups. In the context of Malaysia, the majority group is the Malay ethnics, since their composition is greater than other ethnics. Since we have majority and minority ethnics, so we need to be more considerate and try to accommodate the demands and needs of these ethnics. However, designing and implementing an educational system that is capable of fulfilling the needs of each minority is a challenging task. In working toward this goal, again the education system must be competent enough to carry out its societal function.

Government policies for multi-ethnic society in Malaysia

Our government is trying their best to create policies in economy, politics, social and education aspects that able to fulfill the needs of all ethnics group. What is a policy? According to Jayum Jawan (2003), a policy is a general statement to direct us in pursuit of long-term goals. Policies are very important and serve as guidance in order to achieve government's interest and aspirations. This is the reason why many policies have been implemented by Malaysian government since the day of independence till today in order to sustain ethnics' relationship harmoniously.

Above this, the policy in education is given an extra attention since it is seen as an important medium to unite multi ethnic society (Mohamad Rodzi Abd Razak, 2009). Before the Independence Day, policies such as the Barnes Report (1950), the Fenn-Wu Report (1951) and the Education Ordinance 1952 were the first attempts to unite people through education system. Nevertheless, the Razak Report (1956) was the foundation to form ethnic unity through education in Malaysia (Suseela Malakolunthu & Nagappan C. Rengasamy, 2012). Additionally, the establishment of Education Act 1996 has further guided the directions of Malaysian education system in order to promote the strengthening of inter-ethnic integration. This Act was formulated based on the Razak Report 1956, Education Ordinance 1957, Rahman Talib Report 1960, Education Act 1961, Cabinet Committee 1974 and it was intended to form unity through a uniformity of the education system (Jayum Jawan, 2003). Therefore, in school the uniformity can be

noted from the aspect of the language mode, rules, curriculum and learning syllabus (Omar Mohd. Hashim, 1999).

On the other hand, it is hard to accomplish a mutual agreement in the education system since all the ethnics have different views, aspirations and needs. The existence of vernacular schools (alternative streams) indicate that education system in Malaysia continuously implement policies that are able to accommodate the different needs and demands of multi-ethnic society. Reason being in order to accommodate the needs of ethnics groups, the focus is on pluralism concept, which acknowledges other people's culture, language, customs, religions and so on (Banks, 2006). This approach is totally different from the assimilation concept that has been practiced by most countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and America to face the diversity situation in their country.

However, when the vernacular schools at the primary level are allowed to co-exist alongside mainstream education, it contributed to the ethnic segregation (Santhiram R. Raman & Tan Yao Sua, 2010). In order to overcome segregation in education, the Malaysian government implements various approaches. One of the approaches is the Vision School, which aims to counteract segregation among ethnics at the primary level (MoE, 1995). The Vision School is based on three main types of schools (National, National Chinese and National Tamil) operating together at the same premise. Through this approach, hopefully it will enable the different ethnic students to interact during the break time and co-curriculum activities in natural settings (Mohd Sohaimi Esa, Dayu Sansalu & Budi Anto Mohd Tamiring, 2011).

Also in order to achieve unity, it is important for students to interact with and learn from fellow students of every ethnicity their religion, culture, custom, values and so on. Thus, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has a special programme such as the Student Integration Plan for Unity. Under this integration plan, students from different schools would come together for extra co-curricular activities, sports, competitions, outings and cultural activities (MoE, 1985). So, this plan is a measure to promote school students to mingle freely and learn more about each other's culture and customs (Mahdi Shuid et al. 2010).

The task of retaining harmonious relationship is not an easy job. Looking briefly at the Malaysia education system, there are many changes occurred, but the main intention of the all these policies is to achieve national unity (Amir Hasan Dawi, 2006). All schools in Malaysia are guided by the education policies to carry out programmes or any strategies. Simply put, whatever strategies that are going to be implemented by schools must basically be guided by government's policies. For that reason, this research intends to identify the strategies that have been used or implemented in one of the national secondary school in Malaysia to strengthen relationship among their multi-ethnic students.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, a case study was utilized as method for this study because it involved gathering of data in a detailed manner (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Respondent were selected through purposive sampling, which varied in terms of gender and ethnicity. Overall this study involved 2 school administrators, 7 teachers and 20 form 4 students from various ethnic backgrounds (9 Malays, 6 Chinese, 4 Indians and 1 *Orang Asli*). As an ethical precaution, briefing regarding this study was given and the respondents consent were obtained as recommended by Lambert (2012).

Data in this study was collected through three methods, such as interview, observation and document analysis, since it is the main form of collecting data in the field of qualitative research (Bailey, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Observation was carried out in the class, during school activities, assemblies and school ground. In addition, all the related school documents were analyzed too, so that it will substantiate this research finding. An interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and all interviews were audio-recorded. Students participated in a semi-structured focus group interview, while teachers and school administrators were individually interviewed. The purpose of using semi-structured interview, with open ended questions is to enable probing and expanding of the answer during interview session (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data analysis of this study involved transcribing, coding process and finally themes were identified in response to the research questions (Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2006). To validate this study, we used the triangulation and member checking approach. Apart from validating this study, triangulation also gives a clearer picture of the aspects being researched (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Lambert, 2012).

Results and discussion

According to M. Shamsul Haque (2003), the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia lives peacefully without severe conflict among ethnics occurred such as other countries around the world. The harmonious condition can be maintained because the government is always emphasizing on unity in every policy, including educational policies.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible to make policies and circulars, which aim to strengthen relationship among multi-ethnic students. All these policies and circulars are used as a guideline by schools to carry out appropriate strategies and programmes. Without effective strategies, it is difficult to retain a good relation among students. Data analysis from the research has shown that, there are four strategies to strengthen the relationship between multi-ethnic students in this school. These strategies are listed and discussed as follows:

Nurturing national unity

Analysis of the Independence Day Celebration's report (2012) showed that this school celebrates Malaysian National Day. Principally the objective of this celebration is to enhance the spirit of love towards country and the meaning of unity among people. Many group activities were organized during this celebration such as choirs, videos competition, class decoration, drawing, jigsaw puzzles, drawing and so on. All the programmes were held during the whole month of August and were organized by Independence Month Committee.

The findings regarding Independence Day celebration was further substantiated by interview session with school administrator Madam Mariam (P2: para 124) and teacher Madam Esha (G2: para 100). According to these respondents, all these activities were carried out in groups. This approach was seen as a medium to inculcate the idea of unity among students, since formation of groups was based on different ethnics group.

In short, based on an education circular '*Surat pekeliling ikhtisas bilangan 14/2000-Sambutan hari kemerdekaan peringkat sekolah*' the Independence Day celebration should be celebrated by all schools every year. This celebration is one of the ways to instill unity among multi-ethnic students at the school level. Thus, this school has played

its role effectively as what has been requested by the circular of the Ministry of Education.

Apart from that, the routine practice during the morning assembly such as Rukunegara pledge, singing the National Anthem and raising Malaysian flag by the school, serves as a tool to unite people by creating the sentiment of belonging and sense of togetherness (NL6: Observation school assembly: July 1, 2013, Monday). Similarly Suhana Saad & Jacob (2012), found that, the Rukunegara reading during school assemblies, is one of the ways to build up unity through the sense of togetherness and common identity. Study done by Rutland et al. (2012), reinforced that the inter ethnics relation can be further improved, if a common identity is instilled among students. Realizing this, the Ministry of Education formed various circulars such as '*Surat pekeliling ikhtisas bilangan 2/1971-Rukunegara, Surat pekeliling ikhtisas bilangan 4/1975-Nyanyian lagu Negaraku* and '*Surat pekeliling ikhtisas bilangan 4/1984-Perhimpunan* in order to instill sense of togetherness and unity in school. By right, these circulars should be obliged by all schools in Malaysia.

Indeed, to maintain the positive relationship in multi-ethnic school, the sense of belonging and sharing common values should be nurtured (Romo, 1997). The common values that are important in school include the National Principle (*Rukunegara*) pledge, the National Anthem (*Negaraku* song), patriotic song and Independence Day celebration. All these are the implicit measures, which aim to nurture national unity among multi-ethnic students at school level.

Encouraging interactions among multiethnic students

The school under studied implemented a few rules such as students' placement policy for every form (*peraturan penempatan pelajar bagi setiap tingkatan*), policy of students' arrangement in the classroom (*peraturan penyusunan pelajar dalam kelas*), mixing multi-ethnic students in school programmes (*penggabungan etnik berbeza dalam aktiviti*) and quota system for co-curricular activities (*kuota kaum pada aktiviti ko-kurikulum*). All these approaches are seen as a way to encourage interactions, because the compositions of different ethnics are balanced.

In the analysis of one of the school documents, students' placement policy (D8: Polisi penempatan pelajar bagi setiap tingkatan), the main criteria to allocate the students each year in every class is based on the number of ethnics and not based on merit of examination. By distributing the equal number of ethnics in each of the classes, an opportunity to mix around was created naturally.

The interview session with Madam Kalsom found that the school imposed policy of students' arrangement in the classroom (*peraturan penyusunan pelajar dalam kelas*). According to Madam Kalsom, all the teachers are responsible to arrange students to sit with friends of other ethnics group. The aim of this policy is to encourage student's interaction, by persistence close contact in classroom. (P1: Madam Kalsom, para 32) In addition, the interview session with another teacher, Madam Salmah (G1: para 76), indicates that this school also assigns students in equal ratio of number of ethnics in co-curricular activities. By doing this, the compositions of ethnics are balanced and this will give opportunity for them to know each other better and mingle around comfortably. This study has similarities with Bliss' (1989), that if we want to trigger interactions among students, an appropriate measure should be set. For example, if the programme is designed to mix different ethnics of the students, it will stimulate the interaction among them (Rose & Bylander, 2007; Suseela Malakolunthu & Nagappan C. Rengasamy, 2012;

Henze, Katz & Norte 2000). Study done by Riley & Ettlinger (2011) showed that the co-curricular activities which involved different ethnics should help to strengthen their relationship. In addition, through these activities, it will give them chances to make friends and to reduce stereotype (Romo, 1997).

Undeniably the persistence of ethnic groups in contact will increase the sense of acceptance among different ethnic groups (Aboud, Mendelson & Purdy, 2003; Yip, Seaton & Sellers, 2010; Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Sharan, (2010) and can reduce the negative attitude such as prejudice (Nagda, Tropp & Paluck, 2006). The prejudice attitude can lead to conflict among ethnics (Mohd. Amar Hj. Ibrahim, Hazri b. Jamil & Najeemah Mohd. Yusof, 2013). Thus, by assigning student to mix with the friends of other ethnics group, this will encourage their interaction. They will socially interact without restrictions if there are frequent contacts among them through appropriate ways by this school.

Stimulating the sense of acceptance and tolerance between students

When the students are exposed toward the elements of different culture, the sense of acceptance and tolerance attitude can be fostered. Thus, the school has organized programmes such as the cultural night, the ethnic's cultural exhibition and the notice board which displays the information about Chinese and Indian ethnic in order to expose the students to the different cultures in Malaysia. One of the teachers, Madam Esha explains that the information about ethnic's cultural has helped the students to increase acceptance and tolerance among students.

G2: It helps a lot to appreciate other races. During the Deepavali festival, there will be information regarding this festival at the library. During Chinese New Year, information regarding this festival will be displayed. During Hari Raya festival, there will be information displayed. So, this helps students to learn about other races culture. (G2: Madam Esha, para 174).

In addition, based on the interview session with the school administrator and other teachers, there are also societies based on ethnics such as the Tamil Language Association and Chinese Language Association. These societies organized various activities which involved participation of different ethnics. This provides an opportunity for the different students to know, learn and accept other culture. (P1: Madam Kalsom, para 92) and (G1: Madam Salmah, para 102).

Based on all the interview findings as stated above, it showed that this school is committed to implement many activities based on ethnic's culture. However, according to Denton & Gould (2008), sometimes the school administration does not play their part in developing appropriate activities that are able to expose and develop acceptance of other ethnics' culture.

When the students learn to understand and respect other people's culture, the misunderstanding between them can be avoided (Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2012). Then, the school should play its role in order to mould the students to be more tolerant and competent enough to live in multicultural society (Thomas, 2003). The tolerance and acceptance attitude can be developed in many ways. For example, by exposing students to different cultures that exists in Malaysia and organizes activities that encourage participation of students of different ethnics like what has been implemented by the

school under studied. Apart from this, teachers as educators should emphasize the importance of positive interactions among different ethnic groups, try to instill acceptance of diversity during teaching sessions (Dimitriadou, Tamtelen & Tsakou, 2011).

Creating school environment that reflects diversity of ethnics

The term diversity of ethnics are broad and this comprise of ethnics, religion, culture, belief, education level, gender, physical ability, social class and so on (Morrison & Lumby, 2009). However the diversity of ethnics and cultures are the main focus of many researchers since a lot of dissatisfaction occurred because of these differences.

According to Vedder & O'doword (1999) school is the initial place where individual from various cultural backgrounds can meet in a formal setting. So, the school should play its role to expose the differences of ethnic's culture to all the students. The environment of the school that reflects the multicultural of ethnics in Malaysia, such as practiced by this school will give useful information to students.

Based on the interview session with the school administrator, Madam Kalsom (P1: para 64- 66), she said that her school emphasized on the multi-ethnic cultured environment. She elaborated on the exhibition of the ethnics' festival that was organized by the library every year. During this exhibition, the information regarding ethnics' festival was displayed there.

Besides that, the Indian teacher Miss Rekha said that all the information at school gazebo is related to cultures of ethnics only. Following is an excerpt from the interview session.

G5: Usually I put pictures and story of well-known Indians . Then, I also put articles on Tamil literature...mostly from outside. Mostly the articles related to culture. (G5: Miss Rekha, para 100)

Findings from this study are supported by Romo (1997), whereby when the students are exposed to the correct, reliable information on different racial groups of their society, it will increase their level of understanding. The diversity and the differences between ethnics group are not big issues, but it helps us to be more tolerant people (Nagaraj et al. 2007). So, we can conclude that the strategy to create school environment that mirror multiculturalism, is essential. By doing so, all students are aware and familiar with each other's' traditions, customs and cultures.

Conclusions and challenges ahead

The purpose of this article is to identify the strategies that have been implemented in one of the national secondary school in Malaysia, to strengthen relationship among their multi-ethnic students. Overall, four strategies are noted from this study and all these strategies are discussed earlier.

Every individual are difference in terms of their belief, attitude and other demographic characteristics (Banks, 2006). Therefore, we have to apply appropriate strategies and interventions according to the need of each individual. The strategies that have been discussed above are suitable for students and are guided by the Moe Malaysia circular. Thus, it can be concluded that the school in this study plays its role effectively as instructed by the government. The findings of this research are in line with the

functionalism theory, which emphasized on each individual, to play their role efficiently in society (Andersen & Taylor, 2000; Neuback & Glasberg, 2005; Henslin, 2012). Not surprisingly, it is quite challenging to maintain peaceful and harmonious condition in Malaysia since it has multi-ethnic population. One of the measures is through education system. So, it is necessary for school to play its role preparing students for the responsibilities of an ever-changing diverse ethnic's society. For example, in a culturally diverse classroom, it will require teachers to educate students of difference culture, language, ethnicities and many other characteristics (Radstake, & Leeman, 2010). To meet this challenge, teachers must employ culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers must create a classroom, where all students, regardless of their cultural and ethnics background are welcomed and supported. Besides that, school administration also should be more creative to create programmes not just confined to cultural and festival celebration only. The programmes should be interesting enough to encourage participation of multi-ethnic students.

Lastly, the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia should play their part efficiently. Approach to conduct continuous in service training for teachers is needed (Yan Wing Leung, Timothy Wai Wa Yuen & Yiu Kwong Chong, 2011) since most teachers have insufficient knowledge regarding intercultural issues. As teachers, they have to possess the attitude and belief to prioritize harmony instead of just focusing on examination marks.

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