Cultural Citizenship and the Malaysian "Salad Bowl": Teaching Students to Be "Culturally Responsive" at Schools

Nur Atiqah Tang Abdullah, Anuar Ahmad

Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM, Bangi, Malaysia
Email: atiqah@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

The role of schools in terms of integration and attaining national unity has recently become a recurring question in Malaysia. Different ideas and emphasis of what each group "wants" of education and a nation have already existed among ethnic groups since the pre-independence period. This paper aims to discuss how cultural diversity fosters a sense of competing and contested "nation-of-intent" on these characteristics as perception on denominators such as inculcation of cultural competencies would eventually construct and contain cultural citizenship. Students of each ethnic group still perceive and continue to see "things which matter" pertaining to social interaction and national unity, only from their acute and myopic perspectives. The novelty of this paper provides rationales as to why cultural citizenship should be addressed as it requires enhancement of students' understanding of causes and consequences of ethnic diversity and their readiness to take actions to address national unity. Hence it is apparent education stakeholders have yet to develop a coherent framework for cultural citizenship education and this paper underscores the critical role that education should play in addressing and responding to the schools in all of its complexity.

Keywords

Education, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Citizenship, National Identity

1. Introduction

Introducing cultural diversity to the curriculum will not itself ensure that students develop an understanding of values that underpin cultural forms or the skills needed to handle the challenge of conflicting values, not only between the Malays, Chinese, Indian and other ethnic groups in Malaysia, but also within

them. Much of this can occur naturally within day-to-day teaching of the normal curriculum. But the impact of racism, particularly in its hidden and institutional forms, will need to be addressed explicitly at appropriate points. Teaching about cultural diversity has been an uncontested part of education in Malaysia in different subjects and with different names. Different approaches are involved in the teaching of society and diversity but also in different types of schools. In the context of a plural society, the role of education as a prime mover of change towards more meaningful relationships is pertinent as these meaningful relationships will lead to better social order, respect and peace in the country (Ong, Sivapalan et al., 2013).

2. Aims and Methodology of Study

The major goals of national education policy and primary schools in Malaysia are to "inculcate and nurture national consciousness through fostering common ideals, values, aspiration and loyalties in order to mould national unity and national identity in a multi-ethnic society" (Mamat, Razalli, Hashim, Ahmad, & Awang, 2018). Fundamentally, schools in Malaysia can encourage intercultural sensitivity and respect by allowing students to engage in experiences that foster an appreciation for the multi cultural society. Schools are uniquely positioned to enhance students' ability to understand their place in the community and the world, and improve their ability to make judgments and take action. Education for cultural competencies builds on the ideas of different models of global education such as cultural citizenship education. Despite differences in their focus and scope (cultural differences in Malaysia), this educational model share a common goal to promote students' understanding of the other ethnic groups and empower them to express their views and participate in society. "Competence" is not merely a specific skill but is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values successfully applied to face-to-face, virtual or mediated encounters with people who are perceived to be from a different cultural background, and to individuals' experiences of diversity. Cultural citizenship as part of cultural competencies inculcates a sense of individual civic responsibility with respect to national unity. Furthermore, public divides on national unity in national and vernacular schools are rooted in identity processes and ethnic identities can shape core cultural beliefs driven in part by a motivation to associate with others with similar political and ideological views. However, as a concept or strategy, cultural competence is not yet fully developed. For example, the terminology of the concept suggests that culture and ethnicity, two different notions, are equivalent or interchangeable. In addition, although it is clear that cultural competence is a combination of attitudes, knowledge and skills, it is not evident how and when the right balances between these elements can be achieved. The need to address cultural and ethnic diversity issues in vernacular schools as a means of improving quality of education for all and of eliminating ethnic and racial disparities has been widely emphasized. However, the practical imple-

mentation of these objectives appears to be problematic. In particular, it seems to be difficult to ensure that cultural competency is fully integrated at national and vernacular schools. Frequently, developing cultural competencies is fragmented. In addition, daily experience of dealing and interacting with students revealed that the Malaysian Studies have been given less priority by most students (Mohd, Abdul et. al., 2013). In addition, for teachers and curriculum developers unfamiliar with the approach, it is not always clear how it should be addressed. This paper aims to discuss some practical translations of the vague and abstract terms used in the outlined objectives. It draws upon what is already known in the literature and is related to competencies that underlie the education curriculum in general. Two basic assumptions are fundamental to the conceptual model. Firstly, this paper uses a broad conceptualization of cultural competence, which relates not only to cultural issues, but also to other elements that pertain to students at national and vernacular schools from various ethnic backgrounds, social contexts and prejudice and stereotyping. Secondly, this paper does not assume that students and teachers are culturally and ethnically neutral, but this paper starts instead from the premise that the learning environment of most students is predominantly "Malay", "Chinese", "Indian" and the "Other". By embedding cultural competence information within the typical problems students and teachers grapple with daily, this paper will specify aspects which are important in an ethnically and culturally diverse educational setting. This results in a conceptual framework of cultural competence that is based on the competencies of students and teachers in general. It also provides specific focal points for the integration of cultural competencies among students at national and vernacular schools in Malaysia as empirical studies is limited. In short, this paper aims to discuss ways in which cultural diversity in Malaysia foster a sense of overlapping and contested "nations-of-intent" and hence, impact cultural competencies towards attaining national unity among students at national and vernacular schools.

3. Results and Discussion

The notion of cultural citizenship first appeared in the late 1980s (Miller, 2002), when it was used by some American anthropologists to describe Chicano people's claims and ideas related to citizenship issues in particular towns of certain states of the United States (Rosaldo, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). To be specific, cultural citizenship grants those subordinated or excluded groups in a certain state the possibilities to legitimate their rights to be different and possess their own cultural identity. Delanty (2002) proposed that this approach of cultural citizenship is heavily influenced by the political theory of multicultural politics, as the acknowledgement by law of one's cultural forms, such as cultural resources and cultural capital, would reflect their formal legal status in a given society. Kymlicka & Norman (2000) are main contributors to this approach of cultural citizenship, seeking to bridge citizenship with diversity. They focused on the

concerns of liberal multiculturalism and the accommodation of difference, and further strived for the balance between collective minority cultures and individual majority cultures (Miller, 2002). For instance, Kymlicka (1995) argues that cultural membership provides support for self-identity and dignity, belonging and mutual responsibility (Kymlicka, 1995). Other scholars have also used the term of cultural citizenship to emphasize the importance of cultural diversity in citizenship (Rosaldo, 1997; Ong, 1999). For instance, Young (1989) argued that citizenship must take cultural differences into account, and emphasized the importance of cultural differences and collective rights in her concept of differentiated citizenship (1989). Rosaldo (1997) tries to include aspects of gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality as parts of citizenship, and further emphasizes cultural rights and cultural expression. However, the concerns of cultural citizenship related to political theories in Kymlicka & Norman (2000) mainly reflect issues that are more related to the context of North American and Canadian debates, therefore, it indicates that this approach is more confined within a certain state (Delanty, 2002). On the contrary, Ong (1999) argues that flexible citizenship characterised by multiple loyalties which could transcend the domain of any specific state should receive greater recognition. Globalization, decolonization and multiculturalism in recent decades have created a cultural context characterized by cultural democratization, which provides a solid foundation for the development of cultural citizenship (Turner, 2001). Citizenship is not only related to legal rights such as cultural rights, rather it requires the creation of certain virtues such as shared values, cultural commitment, cultural competence and multicultural forms of community building (Turner, 2001). In this case, the concept of cultural citizenship is a reaction to fragmentation, chaos and conflicts among all groups of people in the western context. Stevenson (2001) groups this approach of cultural citizenship with social theories, and Delanty (2002) contends that the sociological perspective stresses the centrality of culture itself, calling for a broad and adequate understanding of citizenship (Delanty, 2002). As Turner (2001) has explained, "Cultural citizenship can be described as cultural empowerment, namely the capacity to participate effectively, creatively, and successfully within a national culture." Superficially such a form of citizenship would involve access to educational institutions, the possession of an appropriate "living" language, the effective ownership of cultural identity through national citizenship membership and the capacity to hand on and transfer to future generations the richness of a national cultural heritage (Turner, 2001). This sociological approach provides citizens with a flexible form of citizenship (Ong, 1999), and entitles them with chances to participate in cultural domains locally, nationally and globally (Turner, 2001).

Acquiring cultural competence is a life-long process and there is no single point at which an individual becomes completely culturally competent. On that note, diversity is as natural in human society as variety is in nature. Variety in nature is basically harmonious, but diversity in human society is not always harmonious. All societies and nations are aware of ethnic and cultural diversity,

but not all nations perceive or manage diversity in the same manner. Human beings are ever suspicious of "others" who appear to be different from them. History of human civilization is nothing but an account of how each ethnic or cultural group has attempted to dominate or subjugate the "other" groups because they are different. The perception of sameness or difference can be based on a host of real or imagined attributes. Ethnic, language, religion, territory, power, political ideology, food, cultural practices and personal behaviour or habits are some of the known attributes that trigger the "us-and-them" syndrome inhuman groups. Some societies cannot tolerate diversity at all and take steps to aggressively eliminate it, while others not only recognize diversity as natural, they accommodate it and weave it into the very fabric of society. An educational system reflects the socio-political make-up of a society or nation. How far the educational system is able to address or respond to societal diversity is determined by the society itself. A society that accepts, respects and accommodates diversity will create an educational system that promotes inclusion of diverse cultural ingredients into the curriculum, and enables different groups to become assimilated within that society. Such an educational system is flexible and inclusive. It allows for multilingual communication and is basically reflective of the multi-ethnic and multicultural ethos of the society itself. The educational system in a society that does not acknowledge diversity is likely to be ethno-centred, mono-lingual and inflexible. Such an educational system is most likely to promote uniformity, aimed at creating a mono-cultural society. The basic goal of such an educational system is to exclude those who are considered different. The impact of education on societies facing diversity, therefore, can only be determined by the manner in which such societies face diversity, squarely or not at all. While cultural citizenship has drawn increasing attention and discussion in academia, most research has been conducted predominantly within a Western context. Therefore it is necessary to take into account non-Western or in particular, the Malaysian context of cultural citizenship to expand knowledge and get insights for implementation as well. It is evident that the concept of cultural citizenship in Malaysia has been further concerned with issues much related to the competing notions of the nation. In the context of education in Malaysia as a multicultural society, the system deals increasingly with students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Thus, "cultural competence" has been suggested as an instrument that can be used to prepare students and teachers to support them in dealing with issues such as ethnic diversity. Cultural competence is generally defined as a combination of knowledge about certain cultural groups as well as attitudes towards and skills for dealing with cultural diversity.

There are two aspects that this paper would like to highlight—first, an overall understanding of the curriculum is imperative if is to be implemented meaningfully as intended. This means that teachers in this case, who implements the curriculum, must fully understand the content and the spirit of the curriculum. Secondly, it has been pointed out that the national curriculum is both philosophical in its application. Philosophically, the curriculum has to be perceived and

understood clearly. As teachers are concerned, they have to create and develop a learning situation where the teaching processes involve both the acquisition of knowledge and cultural citizenship values. The intended curriculum would fail if the commitment towards the expressed cultural citizenship values is absent among teachers. Thus, the process of curriculum reform involves all mechanisms and structures in the educational system. There must be a synergetic movement towards the fulfillment of a common, beginning from its planning and development, dissemination, implementation and the process of evaluation has that flow of coordination and does not exist in any contradictory pattern along the way.

Even though cultural pluralism is acknowledged, educational responses occasionally may slip into stereotypical patterns. Simplistic views of culture and static concepts of ethnicity may fail to address culture in anything other than romanticized or ossified forms and perpetuate, rather than challenge prejudice. In Malaysia, the development of national identity and citizenship may be frustrated unless the system is prepared to include a genuine exploration of histories, within the formal curriculum. The instability of modern plural and multinational states is better countered through a genuine exploration of the values and perceptions that are held by constituent groups than by seeking to maintain some fictional state unity or "nation state" mythology. There is a need to fully understand the dynamic nature of culture, the complex patterns of ethnic identity and the power of hidden forms of prejudice. The way forward in the education system has probably less to do with identifying a universally applicable model of multicultural education and more to do with a genuine informed commitment on the part of all education to work against cultural myopia, prejudice and disadvantages in all areas of education. Clearly this implies the permeation of education practice and policy with values that promote understanding and justice.

Much talk these days is about the nation-nation and its problems and the transformation of the nation. The notions of nation seem inevitably to capsize into the forms of theorizing in which the catchword is that of "project". The "project" of the nation is that of nation building. However, in the Malaysian context, the understanding of nation building is portrayed by the various ethnic groups building conceptions of their-self, of their personal and social location and their own position in an order of things. It is such restless self-activity that replaces the ascriptions of the one particular form of nation of intent. Nation building is much preoccupied with national identity as an end in itself; nevertheless, the citizens are free to choose the kind of idea and notion of nation, but the imperative is to get on with the "formal" task and achieve. Very often, people do not have a clear idea of what it means to be a citizen, as opposed to being one of the ruler's subjects. Citizenship is not very much a concept that has played a central role in the Malaysian political tradition compared to the concept of a ruler's subjects. It seems the concept of citizenship as slightly unsettling. Citizenship in diverse Malaysia must take a few issues into account, formulate and stat-

ing explicitly idea of "multicultural citizenship" needs to be formulated for a diverse Malaysia. Diversity must be given public status and dignity and Malaysia needs to develop a new social and cultural policy capable or nurturing ethnic identities. The dichotomy of "Malaysian" and ethnic minority needs to be addressed. "Malaysian" must come to be seen as including the ethnic minority cultures and communities. The minorities are an integral part of Malaysia and have as much to offer, and owe as much allegiance to the society as do the majorities. The minority and majority communities in Malaysia must all have space to develop, but in relation to each other. However, of course many practical difficulties may intervene: ethnic rivalries may make co-operation within the state difficult, the national identity may include cultural elements that some ethnic groups find unacceptable, and the nation may find itself being challenged at literally or metaphorically. In Malaysia, the principle remains clear that its society with ethnic cleavages can take part in a collective project of self-determination through a clear and concise understanding of citizenship and cultural citizenship education.

The most obvious factor, is that the idea of nation in question have co-existed in a single political unit, while at the same time each component part has kept its distinct cultural features. However, the recipe for a successful task of nation building in Malaysia involves more than just political integration plus cultural difference. It is suggested that aspects of education, in particular cultural citizenship education, plays an essential role in expressing the thought of being a "Malaysian". Citizenship education is an important but difficult subject because of its different components, its challenges of commitment and its relationship towards diversity. Diversity in the population adds to these difficulties since it turns out that citizenship education is still tacitly committed to homogeneity but has to cope with the increasingly diverse school population in Malaysia.

Participation is a keyword in cultural citizenship education as in an ethnically diverse society. Participation is only possible under the conditions of equality. Citizenship is necessary to give all groups political equality and thus political participation. Political equality, however, does not guarantee structural, economic and societal participation, while on the other hand economic participation is possible without political equality. All students have to cope with participation and its preconditions. Thus, it makes sense to deal with integration and assimilation as factors in the process of gaining participation. The first language of the minorities is only seldom taken into consideration when participation or integration is discussed. Sadly, the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the non-Malays, and which could be of value to Malaysia, is often less emphasized. The recognition of these qualities plays an important role in the discussion of the existence of many nations of intent. Then, participation means that citizens are not only willing to take an active part in the societal and political life but also to offer their own knowledge, which should in return be welcomed by the society at large, and therefore facilitates integration. This is a process that can be learned and experienced in school, thus optimizing the effectiveness of cultural citizen-

ship education. Nonetheless, on the other hand, the dilemma posed for cultural citizenship education by diversity can perhaps be best understood in terms of the competing notions of nation as a public policy. On the other hand, too much emphasis on the recognition of the different nations-of-intent could lead to a situation in which schools celebrate difference and seek to maintain distinctive languages, religions and cultural practices (Shamsul, 2015).

This could be beneficial to personal and social identity and help build the minority students' self-esteem but might mean neglecting the other functions of education-imparting basic skills and knowledge and providing the basis for social equality. Clearly, the need is for a balanced strategy that seeks to achieve both cultural recognition and social equality. That in return requires good planning, special training for teachers and adequate resources. Every education system affected by diversity such as Malaysia has had to struggle with these issues. The responses have varied considerably and have been conditioned by wider historical experiences and societal goals connected with national identity and citizenship.

Cultural citizenship education in Malaysia involves cultivating a sense of national cohesion and loyalty and a sense of obligation and duty to the community and one's fellow citizens. It also requires the qualities of initiative and willingness to participate. But the development of these civic qualities has been slow. Part of the reason has been the difficulty of overcoming the inertia bred of the subservience required by the colonial systems. Partly too, the post-independence governments recognized the potential ambivalence of education for active citizenship. For the process can undermine the very political cohesion it is designed to promote. The future of Malaysia lies in the ability of the country's citizens, in particular the younger generation to understand and believe, in all Malaysian's ability to unite: national unity without a common identity is an exercise in futility. In the context of the Malaysian plural society with a history of decades of uneasy co-existence, with fears and suspicions as constant companions and each community left largely to its own devices, the national unity through a common identity is difficult enough to imagine, let alone embrace wholeheartedly. According to some ethnic minorities, the present day policies of the government is viewed as to benefit the Malay majority and thus tend to divide rather than unite its citizens. The current education system apparently is good as far as it goes but nevertheless it falls far short of the conditions to create a common identity and a sense of being Malaysian. The ethnic minorities view the achievement of a nation built once Malaysia has in place policies of inclusiveness, of justice and equity and of equal opportunity without barriers. As the nation searches for a common identity, it is apparent that the single impediment to national building is the national education system.

In addition, as long as there is existence of the Chinese and Indian primary schools for example, there is a major challenge to develop a sense of being Malaysian. Malay is the national language and it should be the language of instruction in all Malaysian schools. The Malaysian cultural heritage is nevertheless

important. This means there is a crucial need to look at education beyond its utilitarian value. It is believed that when the system of education is depoliticized and addresses the social, economic and political needs of the nation in a rational way, taking on board the cultural and language concerns of the non-Malays, Malaysia will have a better chance of breaking the racial mould and achieving national unity. Clearly, among the significant challenges facing teachers in Malaysia is how to respect and acknowledge the community cultures and knowledge of students while at the same time helping to construct a democratic public community with an overarching set of values to which all students will have a commitment and with which all will identify. In other words, the challenge is to construct a citizenship education that will help foster a just and inclusive pluralistic nation-state that all students and groups will perceive as legitimate. This is a tremendous challenge but an essential task in a pluralistic democratic society. An important aim of the school curriculum should be to educate students so that they will have the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to help create and to live in a public community in which all groups can and will participate.

Teachers should help students to examine, to uncover and to understand the community and culture knowledge they bring to school and to understand how it is alike and different from formal knowledge and from the knowledge that other students bring to campus. Students should also be helped to understand the ways in which their values undergird their personal and community knowledge and how they view and interpret formal tertiary knowledge (Banks, 1996). To educate students to be effective citizens in their cultural communities, nation states and in the world community, it is also important to revise the citizenship education curriculum in substantial ways so that it reflects the complex identities that are emerging in nation-states throughout the world that reflect the growing diversity within them. Students from diverse groups will be able to identify with a curriculum that fosters an overarching national identity only to the extent that is mirrors their perspectives, struggles, hopes and possibilities. A curriculum that incorporates only the knowledge, values, experiences and perspectives of mainstream powerful groups marginalizes the experiences of students who are members of racial, cultural, language and religious minorities. Such a curriculum will not foster an overarching national identity because students will view it as one that has created and constructed by outsiders, people who do not know, understand or value their cultural and community experiences. Essentially, the goal of cultural citizenship education should be of one that is able to construct a civic education curriculum that will be perceived by all students within the nation-state as being in the broad public interest. Only in this way a civic education, perhaps, can be provided that promotes national unity as well as reflects the diverse cultures within the nation-state. This is a difficult but essential task within culturally diverse Malaysian state with many nations that are serious about creating and implementing democratic education. The question of the Malaysian education has to be given careful thought with which is bound up in the ethnic minorities' schools in nation building in particular.

Another aspect of the curriculum related to the teaching of students to be "culturally responsive" is rarely discussed is its ideological underpinning. The philosophy of Malaysian Education is itself ideological in its implication. It explicitly expressed that education in Malaysia aimed "to produce individuals who are intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically balance and harmonious, based on a firm belief and devotion to God" (Ministry of Education, 1989). In a similar tone the purpose of Malaysian Education as stated in the Education Bill 1995, was for the development of knowledge, skills and values. In order for the intended curriculum to meaningfully operationalized, there must be commitment in both the curriculum's philosophical and ideological underpinning on the part of implementing it. The curriculum challenge is essentially an issue of definition linked to the status and approach. It is centred on the question of how and where cultural citizenship is best located in schools. It is inextricably tied up with the process of teaching and learning and the range of approaches, experiences and activities that make up cultural citizenship education in Malaysia. This challenge is uppermost as schools prepare students to deliver and achieve a united Malaysian nation as embodied in Malaysia's "Vision 2020". The effort in this debate in tackling some key implementation issues will provide considerable understanding to schools to meet this challenge. How it is met has implications not only for how effective cultural citizenship education is in schools and beyond, but also, and more specifically, for how strongly links are made between citizenship and differing ideas and notions of nation among students. Hence, there is also a vital need in the curriculum challenge to address the issue of the knowledge base of different groups of Malaysian society to underpin this area. Currently, we know far too little about approaches to and outcomes of cultural citizenship education in Malaysia.

4. Conclusion

In the epilogue to education for cultural citizenship in Malaysia, a better democratic approach to an education system has to be addressed with its practical implications. The approach ought to be applicable and should be informed by a democratic ideal of civic equality; individuals from all ethnic groups should be treated and treat one another as equal citizens, regardless of their gender, race or religion. Cultural citizenship education in the Malaysian democracy can help further civic equality in two importantly different ways: first, by expressing the democratic value of tolerating cultural differences, between the majority of Malays and minority of non-Malays, that are consistent with civic equality; and second, by recognizing the role that cultural differences of both the majority and minority groups have played in shaping in the Malaysian society and the nation in which all Malaysians live. Democracy in Malaysia can defend a set of cultural citizenship educational practices that exhibit both toleration and recognition of cultural differences, depending on the content and social context in Malaysia. Perhaps, the non-Malays being seen as fully Malaysian and accepting themselves

as such, does not imply denying their ethnic origins and identity. Rather, there is a need to take a plural view of the Malaysian identity, understanding it as multi-level, dynamic and encompassing multiple identities. The positive value of diversity and the worth of each community need to be recognized. They enjoy full citizenship as well, while inequality and discrimination must be combated and positive strategies to promote equality and a healthy diverse society must be developed, including the promotion of values and virtues of equity and openness. There must be a universal enjoyment of fundamental rights. Fundamentally, students at schools must be able, through mutually respectful dialogue and recognizing their own and everyone else's rights and responsibilities, to contribute to the society's values and its social and political arrangements—in brief, to shape the society and to determine what it means to be Malaysian. The issue is not only to do with a specific way of talking about common affairs, but above all, of conducting them. Malaysians need to learn to benefit from the diversity of riches through interaction and dialogue, to identify the commonalities and the agreements, and to agree to differ about the disagreements. It is important, too, to be constantly seeking—in particular through dialogue, to find equitable, just, peaceful and positive ways of anticipating, avoiding or resolving conflicts and problems. If this expectation is to be realized, it is essential that cultural citizenship education becomes a strong, evolving and lasting feature of the curriculum experience of all students at schools in Malaysia. The challenges in accomplishing this are considerable. If the vision of cultural citizenship education becoming firmly established in schools and radiating out into the Malaysian community and society is to become a reality, these challenges have to be addressed then.

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