

A Case Study of Racial Diversity in Multicultural School Environment

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Abstract

This paper held and understand perspectives by a diverse group of people in a multicultural school environment in Malaysia. It examined the understanding and attitudes towards, cultural diversity of school administrators, teachers and students in a specific school environment. The study drew on literature in the field of multiculturalism, and used a qualitative case study approach employing an interviews. The paper also examined the concept of cultural diversity as a social phenomenon and links current understanding of the phenomenon to that of the people involved, explaining how and why they think, respond and react the way they do. A national primary school was chosen for the case study. In Malaysia, the government has embarked on an ambitious program to promote national primary schools as 'a school of choice' in attempt to promote 'unity in diversity'. School administrators, teachers, and students of this particular type of school were interviewed and the data analysed. The research revealed that general perceived and accepted condition by the school administrators, teachers and students is racially diverse; they were aware of the racial diversity breadth within the school which referred to the Malays, Chinese, Indians and others as remarks for cultural diversity and racial diversity.

Introduction

Many countries and international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union place a high value on variety. Respect for varied groups, civilizations, minorities, and new multicultural societies are only a few of the notions pertinent to global diversity. It is a remarkable feature for Malaysian society that each ethnic group is more or less identified with the faith to which they belong to. The multiplicity of religions are prevalent in Malaysia is a direct reflection of the diversity of races and ethnic groups that live here. Malaysia's three major races, Malays, Chinese, and Indians, have coexisted for more than a century. According to Abd Rahman et al (2019), social relations across races might be improved, and intercultural marriages are uncommon due to religious differences.

As many have claimed (Aminnuddin, 2020; Assari et al., 2017; Azlan, 2019), education for multicultural society in Malaysia has not been given a high enough priority to raise awareness and promote positive feelings of unity, tolerance, and acceptance among different nationalities and racial/ethnic groups. However, there is evidence that some education policies and educators in several European Union and North American countries, for example, genuine attempt to advocate universal human values, stimulate cross-cultural conversation, raise awareness, and promote true intergroup understanding (Brown et al., 2018).

In certain ways, these remarks may still be applicable, particularly among individuals within a society who, for a variety of reasons, rarely engage with one another. Evidence is slowly collecting to call into question some long-held and beloved ideas about the nature of racial or ethnic identity and boundaries in Malaysia (Cowling & Anderson, 2019; Harris & Han, 2020; Ismail, 2018). However, there is little scholarly evidence about how cultural diversity affects people's perceptions and attitudes. This study addresses this gap by examining school leaders' and students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity. As a result, the following are the study's objectives:

- To explore school leaders' and students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity.

Literature Review

According to Aday and Schmader (2019), the vocabulary used to characterise 'diversity' most commonly refers to persons or groups who are perceived as 'different' or as the 'other,' usually in terms of individual and/or multiple disadvantage, as well as gender, ethnicity, or disability. According to Allen and Regassa (2019) when it comes to policies, multiculturalism encompasses a wide range of formal state policies with two main goals: i) maintaining harmony among varied ethnic groups and ii) managing the relationship between the state and ethnic minorities.

Multicultural education, according to Bonam et al (2017), is an umbrella concept that deals with educational methods relating to class, culture, language, social class, sexuality, and disability. They define it as a method for describing educational policies and practises that recognise, accept, and affirm human diversity and similarities based on gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation.

Al Zu'abi (2018) investigated the level of tolerance in Arabs' daily lives as well as economic transformations within the community. The findings indicated a lack of respect and acceptance as a result of racial affiliation, general attitude, and other factors. Tolerance existed theoretically but not practically. Low tolerance had contributed to the growing divide between the in-group and out-group, preventing harmonious coexistence (Al Zu'abi, 2018). This study also emphasised the significance of cultural tolerance in intercultural relationships in community life.

In Poland, Chetty et al (2020) investigated the level of social tolerance among different ethnic and religious groups towards acceptance of interethnic and interreligious marriage. Ethnic tolerance was higher than religious tolerance. Despite the high likelihood to oppose the idea of interethnic marriages (Jewish and Chinese) for their children, the opposition against inter-religious marriages (Muslim, Jewish, and atheist) was higher (da

Costa, 2019). The connection between religious differences and cultural tolerance was presently explored.

Abdul Rahman et al (2015); Abdul Hamid et al (2016) studied tolerance in various contexts and developed and tested instruments. Abdul Rahman et al (2015) investigated patriotism and tolerance among Malaysian youths, whereas Abdul Hamid et al (2016) investigated the community social capital in Kedah. Tolerance was defined and measured differently by both researchers. Abdul Rahman et al (2015) depicted ethnic tolerance as two interconnected systems, implying that social connections among diverse individuals influenced everyone involved. Social acceptance, ethnic values, compromise, and absorption were all measured. Tolerance of diversity, according to Abdul Hamid et al (2016), is a component of community social capital development. Socialization, acceptance, neighbourliness, respect, and comfort in a diverse community were used to assess tolerance. Social connection and socialisation continue to be important cultural aspects.

To develop an index of ethnic tolerance, a quantitative study was conducted among diverse Malaysian undergraduates from multicultural communities (Husin et al., 2020). The majority had interethnic and interreligious friends and were involved in community activities. They were extremely tolerant, and many agreed on the importance of increasing ethnic and religious tolerance (Wan Husin et al., 2020). Values of tolerance are linked to multicultural communities, intercultural and interreligious friendships.

Methodology

Social constructivism is the study paradigm employed for this article. This paradigm is referred to as 'interpretive qualitative research' by certain authors (Braithwaite, 2018; Clauson & McKnight, 2018). Qualitative research is a sort of educational research that investigates the richness, depth, and complexity of phenomena. Case studies are simply one method of performing qualitative research; other methods include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography (Creswell, 2007), each of which is appropriate for a specific philosophical assumption, research topic, and focus. Given that the goal of this study, which is discussed below, is to investigate how intercultural education is addressed in the actual environment of the multicultural school, a qualitative case study approach is used.

The sample was carefully chosen among National schools, which contained the majority of pupils from varied ethnic origins, for the purpose and context of this case study. According to Creswell (2008), 'purposeful sampling' occurs when a researcher selects persons or sites 'who best allow them to deliver relevant information and to learn about the phenomena' (p. 215). As a result, the researcher found and chose a Malacca national primary school, Malacca National School (MNS is not the genuine name of the school), to participate in his study.

Numerous significant informants among school administrators, teachers, and students were identified and chosen for the interviews. The individuals chosen would be key informants in the sense that they would be subjected to in-depth individual and group interviews (administrators and teachers) (for the students). It is worth noting that one set of interviewees referred to as 'old guys' in this thesis were a group of former MNS students aged about 17 who returned to the school to see their professors to notify them of their achievement in public examinations.

It is important to emphasise that the interviews were the primary source of data and the primary focus of the research, with other approaches such as observations (classroom and participant observations) and documentation providing supplementary and supportive information. Furthermore, as discussed later in this chapter when we discuss the data collection process, interview data proved to be the most useful in answering the research question, particularly because the researcher was interested in explaining people's perceptions of, prioritising their needs and responses to cultural diversity, as well as providing the underlying rationale.

According to Creswell (2008), "data gathering and analysis (and possibly report writing) are simultaneous tasks in qualitative investigations." While gathering data, you may simultaneously be reviewing previously acquired material in search of important ideas" (p. 245). The analysis in this study began early, as the researcher questioned and probed respondents to elicit their ideas, attitudes, and beliefs about the case under study.

Findings

Race is a significant social feature not because of its biology, but because of its cultural significance in any given social group or civilization (Craig & Richeson, 2017). Within the scope of this survey, respondents (school administrators, teachers, and students) stated race was one of the most fundamental concerns of diversity that the national primary school needed to address. Their race perceptions and attitudes can be summarised as follows:

- i. The primary members of racial/ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Others, are the key points of reference for racial and cultural diversity in the school;
- ii. Malacca National School (MNS) is considered as "Mini Malaysia" because the school's racial distinction reflects the diversity of Malaysian society; and
- iii. The young children have a better understanding of other people's cultures because they are racially diverse and "better exposed" than students from other schools.

The first respondent interviewed was the head teacher. In terms of experience, she has been in the teaching services for more than 20 years. This is the second time she has held the head teacher position in this school. The first meeting was very important because information given by the head teacher helped me with the general and overall views about the cultures of the school. At the early stage of the conversation, we talked about school diversity. According to her,

So in this school there is a varieties of student here from the local races... that is Malays, Chinese and Indian, ...and also we have some Eurasians, we also have some Sikhs, we also have mixed race...so we have Chinese and Malays children who intermarriage...also here. Last year one Iraqi...is here.

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 15)

Her explanation above showed her awareness that there are racially diverse students in the school. Not only are the students from the local or main races: the Malays, Chinese and Indians, but also there are other international students, for example from Iraq. Apart from that, there are students in the school that she categorized as "others race" or "mixed race":

such as Eurasians and the Peranakan. The Peranakan, i.e. the Straits-born Chinese and the Portuguese-Eurasian, are among “other races” which claim the heritage of the Melaka culture (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). One of the manager’s comments which mentioned the ‘others race’, especially the Portuguese Eurasians, is translated below.

One thing special about this (school), (that) not all school had...like this school, because we are closed to the Portuguese settlement...[S]o like people said...with that (beside) Indian, Chinese and Malays...we also had Portuguese (students)...which are a lot in this school.

(Document 'School Manager 2', Paragraphs 35 and 37).

In addition, the head teacher also mentioned the students of ‘the mixed race’ or ‘others race’ in the school, which she identified through the parents’ intercultural marriages. More details about the ‘mixed race’ students of MNS are mentioned as follows:

Sometime they are Chinese...but maybe their grand parents are Eurasian. Eurasian marry Eurasian...but their forefathers could be Europeans. So, you know... later (that is why) he/she had a white skin...after that (because of) the mother marry to the father. The father...Chinese...or maybe the mother marry to Malay. That’s... mixed. ...in this school got a lot of parent mixed marriage. It is a modern Malaysia. Modern Malaysia!

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraphs 140-143).

An interesting aspect of her explanation is that, without being asked about it, cultural diversity to her referred to racial and ethnic groups. This kind of classification is a trend and almost like a textbook explanation. This is similar to the explanations about the cultural diversity of Malaysian society in most of the government documents. Firstly she tried to explain the school culture by referring to the three main racial groups, which are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. She, too, did go on to explain about other races and this showed that she is well aware of other races.

What do the respondents think about the racial in their school? The kind of racial acknowledgement mentioned brings out their emotional responses or personal thoughts. With the above race identification, the respondents personally thought that MNS is “Mini Malaysia” because the racial situation in the school is as diverse as in the Malaysian society. The head teacher strongly argued that:

Yes, (this school) we could call it ‘Mini Malaysia’! Yes, yes, it’s true! Yes! Now you see...Malaysia is also... the majority is Malays, right? And then we have all the ethnic groups and all that. It’s the same! In my school also the same! Same! More Malays, but we also have these kinds of people around...Chinese...Indian...the pure Chinese, the pure Indian and the mixed. We all also have the Eurasian children here. The Eurasian...you know, Serani...(or) Nasrani (not sure). Then the Nasrani (should be the Serani) would from the mixed marriages...also got.

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 147)

The above explanation claimed that the diverse culture of the school is a model of the diverse society of Malaysia. The views are also shared by the School Administrator 2 (see, Document 'School Manager 2', Paragraphs 72-78). As explained earlier, the respondent acknowledged that in the school there is a variety of students from the 'local races', which are Malays, Chinese, Indian and other races. They perceived the school culture as racially diverse, and personally thought that this is the same as in the macro culture, Malaysian society. This kind of idea about culture diversity implies a relationship between the school as micro culture and the Malaysian society as the 'parent culture' or the 'macro culture' (Das & Aujla, 2020).

So why did the respondents think that it is so important to have racially diverse students in the school? What benefit does it have to the students and the school? The head teacher appeared to have positive attitudes towards racial diversity that exists in her school. According to her,

So because of...the mixture of race in this school...so the children are being exposed to more things. They are being exposed to another person's culture, another person's ways of talking, another person's ways of doing work, another person's ways of eating....you know sometime they get to see what these people eating...so they get exposed more...they are better exposed to certain things...compare to other schools around this area."

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 19)

This kind of perception is what you might expect to come to the mind of a leader. She looked at the positive aspect of racial diversity in school. By being racially diverse, she thought that MNS students would be "exposed to another person's culture." Also, she expected the students to have more understanding about others' culture because they are "better exposed" compared to students of the other schools around. In other words, hopefully by being exposed to these kinds of things, the students will gain the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices (De Meulenaere et al., 2021). However, it could be argued that just "being exposed" does not mean that they would be sensitive towards other's cultures unless they are helped to take the initiative to learn to respect them. This will be a key focus for discussion later in this study.

Perceived Racial Problems

In general, the school administrators, teachers and students are highly aware of the potential effects racial diversity might have on their relationships. Manager 1 used the same racial identification; i.e. majority and minority to explain about the teachers in the school, as she explained about the students before. But this time, she consciously tried to send a cultural message across by saying that there is no racial problem in the school. According to her,

In my school we don't have any problems about racial or racism...even though the numbers of teachers are Chinese, Indians...Malays. Malays (should be Indians) are the minority... (Indians) teacher minorities...only three...but Indian students in this school... many! Many! There are about...90 over students here!

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 132)

The above statement indicates that as far as she is concerned as the school leader (mentioned several times in paragraph 34-38 and 132), the head teacher “don’t have any problems about racial or racism” even though the teachers and students are of different races: Malay, Chinese and Indian. In Malaysia, racial issues are a bit sensitive and always seen as having high potential to be related to racism or racial problems. Because of this, when asked to explain about teachers in the school, she positively told me that the kind of “racial problems or racism” did not happen at all in this school under her management. So, it is clear that the head teacher wants to convey the message that there is no racial problem between the Malays, Chinese or Indians in the school.

Eventually, what would appear the only problem pertaining to race in MNS is what the head teacher called “intrapersonal problems”. The existence of this form of racial problem emerged during the middle of the interview. She described the racial problem “within the one race” as follows:

Aha...we also have....the Chinese and the Malays are not so bad, you know...the Indians sometime they have ‘intrapersonal problem’. Meaning that, within the Indians’ community... if they are at our school... sometime Indians...Indians children and Indians children (among them)... quarrel. Malays not so bad...Chinese not so bad. But the Indians sometimes....I do not know....maybe it is their culture from outside. So they bring the cultures of the Indians to the school...

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 72)

From the above statement, she described the racial problem as “intrapersonal problems” which could happen to all races, the Chinese, Malays and Indians. But, this intrapersonal problem as she understood, occurred seriously among Indian students in her school because she thought it had something to do with the Indian students’ outside culture. Unfortunately, she did not know exactly what that might be but she suspected that the Indian students might bring in their outside cultural influences into the school. To her, this created problems in the school, such as a quarrel with each other of the same race. A more important point that can be found from her statement is that the problem is categorised based on race, i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian with problems of their own cultures. In other words the problem in the school is divided according to races. But one could argue that there is no interrelation or correlation between any of these when it comes to the problems within each culture.

Some of the respondents signified racial problems among the students, but assumed they are not serious. According to a group of students that I interviewed:

Small gages, only! I don’t think there were any major gages among friends.

(Document 'Student Group 4 Old Boys', Paragraph 108)

Correspondingly, School Manager 2 had this to say about the “little things” that occur among the racially diverse students. She said that:

At the moment...if those little- little things happen...people said that's normal...even among the same race (might have some problems).

(Document 'School Manager 2', Paragraph 66)

The above explanations both seem to suggest that racial problems among diverse groups of students are “normal” and are expected to be on small issues. Contrary to what the head teacher said about the non-existence of racial problem in MNS, School manager 2 admitted that racial problems do exist. But they are very trivial and much tolerated. Another point to note, the phrase “at the moment” indicates uncertainties whether or not such tolerance could be maintained. Nevertheless, collectively, School Manager 2 concludes that regardless of the races, “everybody” which is not only students but also includes the teachers, can get on well together in MNS. Her opinion is translated below.

But as for this school...here I think we don't have any problem. Everybody (in the school) are...definitely we (the teachers and students) mixed well with others. ...because we are multi- racial.

(Document 'School Manager 2', Paragraph 194)

In the same way, one teacher shared the views that current situation in the school, in her own words, is encouraging enough for the diverse group of students, (to tolerate and mix with each other (Teacher 3, paragraph 147). However, she presumed that these relationships among students of different races deteriorated because of parents' chauvinism. According to Teacher 3 as translated below:

I think...in terms of the racial problem...only the Malays who are easily to mix with other race! As for the Chinese I think that is one of the reasons...why the Chinese...they prefer SFI which majority are Chinese. ...if they were here...they think when mixed...with the Malays or...the Indians...they have a kind of feeling that...the Malays are weak...(and the Indians have) dark skin. But our teachers...the Chinese (teachers)...have no problems. Definitely ...all...mixed well with all (other race).

(Document 'Teacher 3', Paragraph 151)

There are two issues to be addressed here: first, the statement above could carry some elements of bias, considering it came from a Malay teacher. She mentioned that the Malays seem to be the most adaptable in interaction with students of other races. Nevertheless, that is because she always experiences difficulties with students of other race, for example to communicate effectively with them (see her comments on the language diversities) during the classroom teaching and learning. The second issue is a strong sense of belonging experienced by the Chinese. She thinks that certain parents of a particular race, i.e. the Chinese, have excessive loyalty to a particular school and “one of the reasons” is because “they prefer SFI which majority are Chinese.” Additionally, Teacher 3 confirmed that the elements of racism among parents exist. She thought that there is a sense of superiority among Chinese parents for their children to mix with Malay and Indian children in the school, as according to her, they are thought to be “weak” and have “dark skin” respectively. Maybe these are the ‘cultural reasoning’ or explanations for the decrease in the number of Chinese students' enrolment in MNS, especially at the Level 1 as mentioned earlier.

However, when comparing her Chinese colleagues with some of the parents, she assumed there is an exception. She added that, “But our teachers...the Chinese (teachers)...have no problems”. To her, she strongly believes that the Chinese teachers are “definitely” able to mix or have the acceptance of other people who hold those different races. My impression was that she interacts frequently with her Chinese colleagues and thus seems to understand more about their ‘cultures’ than the Chinese parents.

According to one of the teachers that I interviewed

You see like there are certain races they are good at certain things, you know. Like for example the Malays, they are good with decorations and all that. So they can start of shares with the... others you know. Which something like a TV you know...a useless TV which is worthless... like people like us I think they would throw it away. But then some of my staff they used it...they are so creative they... for education and all that. So we... share you know...so we can share ideas la, that kind of things la. You know...maybe the others ... maybe they better in their...maths or what ever, so they can sort of... share la...English you know. You see, we... like buddy. Buddy!

(Document 'Teacher 2', Paragraph 190)

Positively, she acknowledged that “certain races they are good at certain things”. Given an example of the Malays’ creativity, she told how she was impressed by a Malay teachers’ effort to ‘reuse a useless TV’ for educational purposes. She thought the “people like us” or ‘people of her race’ might not be creative enough to think till the extent. Or is she is trying to impress people because she is Malay? Despite cultural differences, according to her, it is possible for the diverse racial group of teachers to share the professional experience for the benefit of the school and the teachers. Thus she urged that, “maybe the others... they better in their...maths or what ever, so they can sort of... shares ideas and they also should act like “buddy”. Nevertheless, the explanation above seemed to imply that certain races were good with certain skills and generally this would develop the idea of job specification along racial lines. This in fact is categorizing skills within a race, which could aggravate a misconception that certain race suits only certain type of profession/job.

Conclusion

It is generally perceived and accepted by the school administrators, teachers and students that MNS is racially diverse; they were aware of the breadth of racial diversity within the school in that they referred to the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others as the main point of reference for cultural diversity as well as racial diversity. They also claimed that MNS is “Mini Malaysia”. This comment reflects their understanding of the school as the microcosm of Malaysian society. Their comments however revealed that the concepts of racial diversity and racial balance are not straightforward; some considered diversity in terms of concepts of ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ or in terms of ‘Malay’ or ‘non-Malay’. Others considered diversity in terms of individual classrooms not just the school as whole.

These broad, general attitudes to diversity could be described as positive. For example, the young children would gain ‘more understanding about others’ cultures’ and they are ‘being exposed to another person’s culture’. Similarly, according to the head teacher, “we do mix well with other...because we are multi-racial”. They tended to see racial problems as non-existent or trivial and it will be interesting in due course to compare this view with other data.

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