

Preschool Teachers' Multicultural Teaching Competencies in Malaysia

Rohaty Mohd Majzub and Salasiah Hashim

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

Abstract: Malaysia is widely known to be a multiethnic nation that has engineered nation-building and fostered unity successfully through its education system. The preschool years are the most formative stage of human development and as such have been earmarked as an important window to create and enhance multicultural awareness. The National Unity Preschool (JAPNIN) system in Malaysia has addressed the issues of national unity and solidarity through its teacher training and curriculum. This paper reports the findings of a study on multicultural competencies among preschool teachers in Malaysia. A total of 136 preschool teachers in the state of Selangor were involved in the study. The instrument of the study was adapted from the Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The main finding highlighted the high level of competency of the majority of preschool teachers in multicultural teaching and found no significant differences between teacher competencies in culturally homogenous v. heterogeneous classes (mean scores of 4.52 v. 4.53). The results indicate the need for further training of preschool teachers to sustain and enhance multicultural teaching competencies, as well as the need to conduct more study of this area.

Key words: Cultural awareness • Preschool • Multicultural teaching competencies • Ethnic bias • Multicultural education

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has more than 200 ethnic groups of various cultures, religions and languages. This diversity is the main challenge in realizing the concept of 'One Malaysia' (1Malaysia) as introduced by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak (2009-present). The 'One Malaysia' seeks to improve the relations of all Malaysians with one another regardless of race, religion, or cultural background. According to the Malaysian Department of Statistics, there are currently 27.17 million Malaysians, with an ethnic breakdown of 57% Malay, 25% Chinese, 10% Indian (South Asian) and the remaining 14% from many other groups. This multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious diversity makes it imperative to maintain peace and harmony through ethnic integration [1, 2]. The Malaysian government has since independence in 1957 implemented its nation-building strategies in large part through the education system. As the preschool years are a formative and highly influential stage of development, multicultural education starts during these early years.

The formation of national identity, national integration and national solidarity has been an important focus of the National Unity Preschools in Malaysia. One of the policies of these schools is to maintain ethnically heterogeneous classes with a representative mix of children of different races and ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese and Indian as well as perhaps other groups. Although it is difficult to fully achieve this goal for geographical and demographic reasons, it is a much-preferred alternative to homogenous classrooms. National Unity preschool classes can encourage children to learn multicultural values and develop social skills by building relationships with other children of other ethnicities. Additionally, the *National Preschool Curriculum* [4] has integrated the elements of multiculturalism, nationalism and patriotism, aimed at orienting children to understanding and valuing the cultures of all ethnic groups in Malaysia. The *humanistic* component of this curriculum seeks to establish mutual respect and tolerance towards people of different cultures. *Multicultural* elements include knowledge and respect toward the cultures and lifestyles of other ethnic groups, as

demonstrated by practices such as knowing about their customs, traditions and religions. Teachers in these settings need to prepare themselves with awareness, knowledge and multicultural-interaction skills. Prosen and Kuscer [3] state that preschool plays an important role in children's socialization process. Children have to face the challenges of cultural adjustment in a situation where teachers are *cultural agents* helping children negotiate between home, school and the community [5, 6]. It is important to realize that teachers' experiences and multicultural education and skills may not be adequate to address students' diverse cultural backgrounds, leading to a mismatch with students' diverse background [7-9]. Grootboom [10] stated that students in a class which is composed of children from various cultures tend to have more social-interaction problems due to the mixing of cultures. In the case of these students, the teacher plays the most important role in helping to develop their social skills. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering knowledge and helping children of different ethnic groups to work together, but also become the main agents in developing these children's social skills.

Teachers' *multicultural competence* is the ability to teach students with various cultural backgrounds. The teachers must have complex cultural, social and emotional awareness and sensitivity as well as knowledge in the various fields and skills of any preschool teacher to be able to do multicultural teaching [11]. The choice of methodology used in multicultural education and the school-based support system help increase the cultural competence of teachers and help them fulfil their role [12-15]. The role of the teacher as a multicultural agent is stress by [14]. Multicultural teaching competency is an on-going process whereby teachers have to 1) examine their attitudes and beliefs regarding multiculturalism, 2) increase their understanding of characteristics of various cultures and 3) examine the effects of their knowledge and beliefs on their teaching [16]. The current study has been designed to address the following questions: 1) What is the level of National Unity Preschool teachers' multicultural teaching competency? and 2) Is there a significant difference in this competency between teachers of homogenous and heterogeneous classes?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was conducted involving a purposive sample of teachers from National Unity Preschools in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The sample consisted of

136 female teachers, with the majority (87%) between 35 and 45 years old with more than ten years of teaching experience. Some teachers taught in homogenous classes where there was only one ethnic group (Malays) and some in heterogeneous classes in which all three major ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians) were represented. The researcher identified classes as homogenous and heterogeneous by the ethnic composition of the student body. The data were analysed using SPSS 18. Descriptive- and inferential-statistical analyses were carried out. The instrument of the study was a questionnaire adapted from the Multicultural Teaching Competencies Scales (MTCS) [14]. The pilot test indicated a high-reliability Cronbach's alpha (α) = 0.7910. The MTCS uses a Likert-like scale (1 = 'strongly agree'; 6 = 'strongly disagree'). The MTCS was comprised of ten items designed to assess multicultural teaching competencies (a complete list of which is given in the Results and Discussion section below).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the MTCS were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the level of the preschool teachers in the various multicultural competencies. An independent t-test was used to determine whether significant differences exist in the level of these competencies according to whether the teachers were in homogenous or heterogeneous classes.

Table 1 shows that the majority of teachers had high multicultural teaching competencies, with a mean of 4.76 and a standard deviation of 0.39. It can be seen that nine out of ten items showed high agreement (mean (M) = 4.0 and above) and one item was rated medium (M = 3.63). This means that preschool teachers agreed that they have most of the multicultural teaching competencies. These competencies were planning school events to increase student knowledge about diverse ethnic groups (M =5.07), integrating varied cultural values and lifestyles of different ethnic groups into their teaching (M =5.05), planning activities and school events related to cultural practices from different groups (M = 5.97), making efforts to help students from ethnic minorities adapt to school (M =5.07), making changes and consulting administrators regularly on multicultural issues (M =4.78), developing supportive relationships with ethnic-minority parents (M =4.93) and ensuring that the curricula integrates topics relevant to multiculturalism. The lowest mean recorded was for the item: 'I rarely examine the

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations: Multicultural Teaching Competencies of Preschool Teachers

Item	Mean	SD	Level
1. I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of racial and ethnic minority groups into my teaching	5.05	0.65	High
2. I plan many activities to celebrate diverse cultural practices in the classroom	5.11	0.52	High
3. I plan school events to increase students' knowledge about the cultural traditions of various racial and ethnic groups	5.07	0.51	High
4. My curriculum integrates topics and events related to racial and ethnic minority populations	4.63	0.84	High
5. I make changes within the general school environment so that racial and ethnic minority students will have an equal chance for success	5.07	0.65	High
6. I consult regularly with other teachers or administrators to help me understand multicultural issues related to instruction	4.78	0.76	High
7. I rarely examine the instructional materials I use in the classroom for racial or ethnic bias	3.63	1.35	Medium
8. I often include examples of the experiences and perspectives of racial and ethnic groups during my classroom lessons	4.66	0.90	High
9. I often promote diversity by the behaviours I exhibit	4.71	0.82	High
10. I establish strong, supportive relationship with racial and ethnic minority parents	4.93	0.92	High
Total	4.76	0.39	High

Tables 2: Differences in Teachers' Multicultural Teaching Competencies Between Homogenous and Heterogeneous classes

Variable	Type of Class	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Teachers' Multicultural	Homogenous	38	4.52	0.44	-0.175	0.861
Teaching Competency	Heterogeneous	98	4.53	0.45		

instructional materials for racial or ethnic bias', ($M=3.63$) which indicates slight disagreement. This statement very clearly indicates that teachers are aware of racial bias embedded in preschool textbooks. Interestingly this particular item is negative as opposed to all other items in the multicultural teaching competencies. Most probably the author is of the opinion that such item can express more strongly the tone of biasness. It can be equally explained that trained and experienced preschool teacher were equally able to respond to such item and that although negatively worded the item contributed equally to the measurement of multicultural teaching competencies.

The findings indicate that these high levels of competencies were expected from the teachers as part of their duty to implement the *National Preschool Curriculum*, which stresses the component of multiculturalism. These results may be explained by the fact that the sample of this study were experienced preschool teachers who had implemented the multicultural curriculum for many years. They had also attended training sessions to enhance their teaching professionalism and had been involved with parents of preschoolers from various ethnic groups during community activities.

Table 2 shows the independent t-test results, which indicate that there were no significant differences in multicultural teaching competencies between

heterogeneous and homogenous classes ($t = -0.175$, 0.861). The mean of teacher's multicultural competencies in the homogenous class is 4.52 and that in the heterogeneous class is 4.53. This similarity in competencies can be explained by the fact that 75.6% of the teachers had attended similar training related to multicultural teaching and learning, organized by the Malaysian Department of National Unity. The training helped teachers develop the competencies needed, regardless of whether their classes were homogenous or heterogeneous. It can also be noted that teachers are equally competent in both homogenous and heterogeneous classes because of the uniformity in preschool curriculum goals in both types of classroom and that most have taught in both homogenous and heterogeneous classes in the past.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural teaching competencies are indeed very important in ensuring that the goals of multicultural education are achieved, especially in a multiethnic and multiracial society that has explicitly embraced those goals such as Malaysia. The present study indicates that preschool teachers in the National Unity Preschools possessed these needed and expected competencies and are able to enhance the success of multicultural education. Since the preschool stage is the foundation for

subsequent learning, further curriculum development at this stage can capitalize on and benefit from this study. This study also indicated that there were no differences in multicultural teaching competencies between classes with one ethnic group (homogenous classes) and classes with multiple ethnic groups (heterogeneous classes). This can be explained by the awareness of teachers and children of the mainstream social agenda of social solidarity and national unity across ethnic boundaries. A qualitative study involving a bigger and a more varied sample could usefully be conducted to further verify and support the presence of the competencies studied in this paper. Additionally, further investigation into the processes of inculcating these skills in the classroom should be examined and documented in pursuit of the goals of teacher professional development and lifelong learning. Teacher-training institutions both locally and abroad, can take the success of acquisition of multicultural teaching competencies in teachers from the National Unity Preschools in Malaysia as a benchmark.

REFERENCES

1. Najeemah, M.Y., 2005. Multicultural Education Practice Among teachers in national Secondary Schools: A Case Study in Kedah. *Educators and Education J.*, 20: 97-112.
2. Ali Tekin, 2010. The influence of religious and socio-cultural variables on the participation of female University students in leisure activities. *World Applied Science Journal* 9(11): 1286-1293.
3. Prosen, S. and M. Pergar Kušcer, 2007. The Preschool teacher as an object of attachment. In Ross, A. *Citizenship Education in Society*. London.
4. Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2009. Standard Kurikulum Prasekolah Kebangsaan. Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum. Putrajaya. Malaysia.
5. Dantas, M.L., 2007. Building Teacher Competency To Work With Diverse Learners in The Context of International Education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34: 75-94.
6. Gay G., 2002. Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *J. Teacher Education*, 53(2): 106-116.
7. Necochea, J., 1997. When cultures clash. *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 27: 20-23.
8. Casteel, C.A., 1998. Teacher-student interactions and race in integrated classrooms. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(2): 115-120.
9. Cartledge, G., C.D. Kea and D. Ida, 2000. Anticipating differences-celebrating strengths: Providing culturally competent services for students with serious emotional disturbance. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(3): 30-37.
10. Grootboom, G.A., 2007. How Adolescent Perceive Their Future and Why: A Cross Cultural Study. Phd thesis. University of Free State Bloemfontein.
11. Diller, J.V. and J. Moule, 2005. *Cultural competence: A primer for educators*. Toronto, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
12. Brown, E., 2004. What Precipitates Change in Cultural Diversity Awareness During A Multicultural Course: The Message or The Method. *J. Teacher Education*, 55: 325-340.
13. Flanagan, D.F., 1995. Multicultural knowledge and Attitudes of pre-service teachers. Master Thesis, California State University-Fullerton. *Masters Abstract International*, 33(6): 1644.
14. Dukes, C. and K. Ming, 2006. Fostering culture competence through school-based routines. *Multicultural Education*, 14. Florida Atlantic University. USA.
15. Larke, P.J., 1990. Cultural diversity awareness inventory: Assessing the sensitivity of Preservice teachers. *Action in Teacher Education*, 12(3): 23-30.
16. Spanierman, L.B., E. Oh, P.P. Heppner, H.A. Neville, M. Mobley, C.V. Wright, F.R. Dillon and R. Navarro, 2010. The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS): Development and Initial Validation. *Urban Education XX(X)*: 1-25. Sage Publication. <http://www.sagepublications.com>. (18 November 2010).