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Multicultural Pedagogy: Strengthening Social Interaction Among Multi-Ethnic Pre-School Children

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Abstract

This study explored multicultural pedagogy in pre-school education and how it plays an important role in strengthening the social interactions among children. The Multicultural Pedagogy approach in teaching children has established the multi-ethnic (PERPADUAN/Unity) pre-school. It is a qualitative study with data drawn from observation and interview sessions aimed to identify strategies in nurturing social interaction among multi-ethnic children. Through purposive sampling, a teacher with twenty-five children and parents from various ethnicities were selected. This study revealed that practising multicultural pedagogy reflects the diversity of ethnics strengthening social interaction. The teacher exposed the children to the cultures of every ethnic group to ensure they have understood other cultures from different ethnicity. When the children are exposed to the elements of different cultures, a sense of acceptance and tolerance attitude can be fostered. This strategy nurtured national integration, encouraging interactions among multi-ethnic children, stimulating acceptance and tolerance between children and creating a school environment that reflects the diversity of ethnicities. Core multicultural elements have been found in the PERPADUAN/Unity School. Overall findings from the current study provide new evidence illustrating how multicultural pedagogy implemented strengthens social interaction in early childhood education.

Keywords: *multi-ethnic, pre-school, multicultural, pedagogy, social interaction.*

Introduction

In Malaysia, the population is dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. Many factors contribute to the existence and composition changes of ethnic that become a multi-ethnic society, such as migration, commercial activities, marriage, colonisation era, and formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1969 (Onwubiko, 2012). However, misunderstanding among different ethnic groups in administration, economy, education, language, religion, and culture sometimes cannot be evaded (Lai Fong Yang & Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, 2012). This situation allegedly creates racial polarisation at Malay-dominated national schools, especially in recent years (Rais Yatim, Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, The Sun, 2009). It could lead to the social interaction of the school children who seem to find it difficult to establish friendships and get along with fellow pupils from diverse backgrounds, thus resulting in children having little respect for each other. In line with this, the multi-ethnic pre-school nurtures a spirit of harmony, neighbourliness, unity, and nationality among children from different races, which may contribute to racial integration. In 1972, the Department of National Unity and Integration established multi-ethnic (PERPADUAN or Unity) pre-school for children from multi-ethnic backgrounds. It is to provide opportunities for the children to understand and develop the social values of various ethnic groups and the practices of commonality based on Malaysian culture. In order to understand the impact of ethnicity on children's social interaction, we have reviewed the literature in line with this study. The study of how pedagogy in this pre-school encourages social interactions among children is important for improving intergroup relations in schools in Malaysia.

Theoretical Foundation

The Bio-Ecological Bronfenbrenner (2006) theory refers to the multicultural pedagogical practices in the microsystem layers of PERPADUAN/Unity kindergarten. This theory emphasises the determinant factors in a multi-ethnic pre-school context as follows: firstly, they deal with children's social interactions and how they relate with others, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 798). Secondly, it deals with the pre-school ethos and settings which suit cultural diversity, i.e., teachers, curriculum, ethos, and environment. Pre-school ethos and curriculum practices are important for teachers in planning their pedagogical

use of the programmes to promote social interaction (Sykes, 2018; Vannebo & Ljunggren, 2021).

Literature Review

Multi-ethnic pre-school refers to pre-school that includes children from different ethnic groups, which is the pre-school's policy to ensure the composition of the pre-school entrants consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indian, and other Aboriginal populations. The multi-ethnic pre-school aims to unite diverse ethnic groups of Malaysians to promote national integration. Research shows that interracial contact between different ethnic groups improves intergroup attitudes. According to Feddes, Noack, and Rutland (2009), multi-ethnic pre-schools and the tolerant nature of such schools influence positive inter-ethnic interaction. Aboud, Mendelson, and Purdy (2003) found social interaction to be a keystone to reducing prejudice. Social interaction refers to interactive companions, relationships, mutual friendships, reciprocity and perceived qualities of mutual friends (Hashim et al., 2015). It may be considered a mechanism for maintaining sustained contact and reducing prejudice (Huda et al., 2021). Ahmad and Awang (2016) highlighted the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy for effective teaching.

Children who formed cross-ethnic friendships were more likely to be viewed by teachers as relationally inclusive and possessing leadership skills, having cross-ethnic and similar ethnic friendships. However, the number of cross-ethnic friendships differs across ethnicities. The different racial and ethnic groups may influence not only interactions but also peer preferences and peer relationships. It is supported by Reid et al. (2019), who explained the differences of ethnic group interactions in the classroom learning activity and promoted more positive social norms regarding cross-ethnic interaction. However, Puur et al. (2018) argued that children with cross-ethnic interaction are uncommon and relatively fragile. The literature suggested that ethnicity is one of the major contributions to social interactions among children (Reid et al., 2019). According to Chi-Hung and Ming-Tak (2017), the practice of multicultural teaching in early childhood education is an important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programmes. The result indicates that the most important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programmes is pre-school teachers (Kim & Connelly, 2019; Mamat et al., 2022). Bentley (2012) explained that teaching multiculturalism in the early childhood classroom practices in the everyday lives of four- and five-year-olds constructs

meaning around multiculturalism. Anderson (2018) suggested that children develop their own concepts in meaningful ways, and the fundamental values can be integrated into the lives of young children, especially in the early childhood classroom (Bennett et al., 2018).

Since pre-school is the first multicultural environment children encounter, its function in nurturing social interaction and maintaining unity cannot be denied (Andrea et al., 2021; Gomes & Holmberg, 2010; Howard, 2018). Definitely, children who attend pre-schools with diverse children can understand children from different backgrounds and learn to function in a multicultural environment (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Understanding other ethnicities can only be attained through continuous interaction among them (van As et al., 2020). So, children must learn how to interact in a diverse environment, such as in multi-ethnic pre-schools (Mamat et al., 2018). Gonçalves (2011) found that frequent contacts between diverse children help reduce cultural barriers and prejudice and contribute to intercultural sensitivity and competence (Gezer, 2018). The education system must be aware of this to accomplish a harmonious multicultural environment. The pedagogical need to design a multi-ethnic pre-school capable of fulfilling the needs of each minority is a challenging task. However, there is very little research on multicultural pedagogy that influence ethnic interaction.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used as the method for this study because it involved gathering data in a detailed manner (Merriam, 1998). A multi-ethnic (PERPADUAN/Unity) pre-school in the urban area of Malaysia was selected because of its multi-ethnic proportions. Children were from five ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, and Orang Asli (Aboriginal). Overall, 25 children from various ethnic backgrounds (10 Malays, 5 Chinese, 6 Indians, 3 Iban, and 1 Orang Asli). All children were chosen as respondents regardless of their age (5–6 years). We interviewed the teacher and 25 parents. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, which varied in gender and ethnicity. As an ethical precaution, a briefing regarding this study was given, and the respondents' consent was obtained as recommended by Lambert (2012).

Observation techniques were applied to the children, and then semi-structured interviews were held with the children, teachers and parents. An interview protocol was developed based on the research objective, and all interviews were audio-recorded. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions enabled probing

and expanding the answer during the interview session (Hays & Singh, 2012). In order to cover in-depth data, we worked in the pre-school every day for 14 weeks. The observation was carried out in the class and during school activities. Every child was observed within 3 to 5 times. To validate this study, triangulation also gives a clearer picture of the aspects being researched (Lambert, 2012; Ahmad et al., 2021). The observation required a sufficient number of observation sessions to achieve a “saturation point” when it becomes evident that any additional sessions would be simply repeated. We spent about 10 to 20 minutes per session with each child. All the data from photographs, field notes (observations), and interview transcripts were written, and then they were coded into concepts, categories and themes. It started with open coding. Afterwards, the data were put into clustering codes, families of concepts or categories, which finally captured emergent themes from the clusters of codes. These themes were cross-checked and verified with the help of NVivo.

Results

Data analysis from the research has shown that the pedagogy strategy strengthens the social interaction between multi-ethnic children in this pre-school. The teacher exposed children to the cultures of every ethnic group to ensure they have understood other cultures from different ethnicity. When the children are exposed to the elements of different cultures, a sense of acceptance and tolerance attitude can be fostered. Beside classroom teaching activities, the teacher and Parent Teacher Organisation (PTA) implemented outdoor activities such as the cultural night, the ethnic’s cultural exhibition, visiting museum and cultural centre, mosque, Buddhist and Hinduism temples. Other than that, the notice board and display board portray all the information about Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Other Bumiputra ethnicities to expose the children to the different cultures in Malaysia. According to the teacher, the following activities: celebrating festivals in Malaysia based on ethnic backgrounds are held in pre-school as part of the annual ceremonies in all pre-schools. For example, the celebrations of “*Hari Raya*” (Eid Mubarak) for Malays, Chinese New Year for Chinese, and “*Deepavali*” for Indians were together held in pre-school. They arrange the activities with the children and parents to celebrate the festival at the school to give opportunities to the children from different ethnic backgrounds to experience the situation and environment of every festival celebrated by Malays, Chinese or Indians. The main objective was to integrate a multicultural approach. For example, as a preparation to celebrate

Deepavali, the school is decorated with “a row of lamps”, with foods like “*kuih batu*”, “*maruku*” and others. There are similar celebrations for “*Hari Raya*” and Chinese New Year, which come up with various decorations and foods. During the celebrations, the children wear their traditional dress, for example, “*baju Melayu*” and “*baju kurung*” for the Malay, the “*cheongsam*” for the Chinese children whilst the Indian people wear “*sari*” and “*dhoti*”. According to the teacher, these three celebrations are held in pre-school once a year after the celebration with full preparation that involves children and their parents as a part of pre-school niches. This explanation is based on the teacher’s report and pre-school yearly report, which is documented in the pre-school video and summary in the Annual Report to the Department of Integration and National Unity.

Most parents practise their cultural norms and values based on their ethnic norms and beliefs. Parents set their own rules at home based on their ethnic background.

Mrs Mona (pseudonym): I practise based on the Malay norms and values and my beliefs. I shall teach my children what I have learnt from my mother and father, which they learnt from their parents. My son will follow what I have been doing until now.

Mrs Lim (pseudonym): Whatever we practise... whatever my parents taught me I shall teach my children... my parents always support and... they always guide me. They (my children) follow me whatever culture which is according to mine...

The teacher practised multicultural teaching and learning activity that reflects the multi-ethnic backgrounds. The teacher explained her pedagogical style in reference to the ethnic groups that she practices cultural diversity activities when teaching children. The teacher exposed the children to each other. The activity she prepared reflects what children practice every day. All the teaching materials used in this pre-school, such as photos, video documentaries, festivals, and materials related to the ethnic entity, have become references to the education department. The teacher exposed the children to concepts based on multi-ethnics, such as cultural tolerance, which respects other cultures in the country. For example,

The teacher teaches about respect, respecting teachers and parents have all become good habits for the children when they greet the teachers. Children kiss the teacher’s hand.
(Observation: Morning Session Episode [12 June 2019]).

This pre-school transmitting positive cultural tolerance is of utmost importance to guarantee a harmonious community. This pre-school shows responsibility to develop the children's cultural awareness. Every ethnic group has its own rituals, fostering cultural tolerance towards other cultures through multicultural pedagogy. From the parents' perspective, being respectful refers to being polite to other people, such as adults or guests, and reflects one's behaviour. In a multicultural society such as Malaysia, respecting and tolerating other cultures is essential in uniting the various ethnic groups. Mrs Tan (pseudonym) said: "I have advised her to respect the parents, but she does not understand and does not follow the advice. Tell her to talk politely. Do not shout at her brother...father and mother".

Discussion

This pre-school can be considered a multicultural pedagogical centre based on the ethnic situation in the school, which reflects the diversity of Malaysian society with reference to the teaching approach that reflects multi-ethnic groups and cultural diversity practised. The teacher has exposed the children to the cultures of every ethnic group to ensure they have sensitivity towards other ethnic groups. Findings from this study are supported by Reid et al. (2019) and van As et al. (2020), who claim that when the children are exposed and taught the correct, reliable information on different racial groups of their society, it increases their level of understanding. It is clear evidence from the current study that pre-school teachers used many tangible cultural products such as traditional food and clothes in order to expose children to cultural differences. The diversity and the differences between ethnic groups exist in pre-schools, but how teachers use those elements to promote tolerance is supposed to be a core focus in teaching diversity (Alfitri, Awang, & Ahmad 2014; Nagaraj et al., 2007; Gezer, 2018). So, we can conclude that pedagogy practices involving multiculturalism are essential. By doing so, all children are aware and familiar with each other's traditions, customs and cultures.

This pre-school was found to inculcate integration values and ideas towards national unity for the three major ethnic groups as targeted for every child. In this case, from the teacher's point of view, the pre-school activities are important for the children in a multi-ethnic pre-school in order for them to understand and accept the heterogeneous ethnic. Although this study is consistent with the past studies by Prochner, Clegmen, and Green (2008), who found the suitability of pre-school design and pedagogical materials for promoting integration (Prochner

et al., 2008; Andrea et al., 2021), the actual meaning of multi-ethnic sensitivity elements are still unknown. Even though materials in the pre-school space encourage the children's interactions (Howard, 2018), there is still unclear data to elicit teachers' abilities to manage any socio-interaction conflict in classrooms. Similar to Mamat et al. (2018), pre-school is the initial place where individuals from various cultural backgrounds can meet in a formal setting. So, the pedagogical aspect in pre-school should play its role in exposing the differences of ethnic culture to all the children (Mamat et al., 2022). According to Hsuan-Chen (2017), the pedagogy for pre-school multicultural education is used to help young children to build a solid foundation in terms of multicultural awareness and literacy.

This study is similar to that of Hashim et al. (2015), who claim that if the pedagogy is designed for different children's ethnicities, activities will stimulate interactions among them (Kim & Connelly, 2019). There is extensive evidence from parents' perspectives to confirm that "gaining respect" is the central point of inter-ethnic communication. However, the extent to which its interaction promotes happiness among children has yet to be discovered (Hashim et al., 2016). The current study has highlighted a new dimension of multicultural pedagogy by looking at how inter-ethnic communications are consolidated in the early childhood education setting of PERPADUAN Pre-school. Many social skills are practised in this school setting. It differs from the past study, where intercultural communication is more likely to occur in an out-of-school setting (Tonge et al., 2019). Undeniably the persistence of ethnic groups in contact will increase the sense of acceptance among different ethnic groups (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Huda et al., 2021), and it can reduce the negative attitude such as prejudice. The prejudiced attitude can lead to conflict among ethnics (Hashim et al., 2015). Thus, assigning children to mix with friends from other ethnic groups will encourage social interaction.

In general, the psychological literature shows that child development is evolving continuously. However, many past studies in multicultural pedagogy tend to focus on teaching and learning practices at primary and secondary levels rather than early childhood. Since the psychological development of children at an early stage differs from the primary and intermediate levels, specific studies on multicultural pedagogy at the pre-school level in multi-ethnic society was carried out. The Malaysian government established a multicultural pre-school, namely PERPADUAN/Unity Pre-school, which aims at promoting social integration among multi-ethnic children. The PERPADUAN/Unity Pre-school can be considered a multicultural early childhood education model that provides a learning space for socio-interaction at the *microsystem* layer (Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological theory).

New Elements of Multicultural Pedagogy

Exploration made in this study has produced at least two key elements in multicultural pedagogy. A key multicultural element of pedagogy for early childhood education is related to explicit exposure to the cultural diversity that can be celebrated as the basis of tolerance in cultural diversity. It includes celebrating religious festivals, which is a common practice in the country. Furthermore, in Asian societies, religious values are the fundamental core to cultural differences. Thus, early childhood teachers need to use a variety of interesting and practical approaches to raising awareness of religion-based values in cultural practice. It differs from multicultural pedagogy at primary and secondary levels in that many approaches at those levels are more complex, detailed and deeply culturally related to the differences and diversity of multi-values and multiculturalism in local and regional societies. The second element of multicultural pedagogy is related to teachers' creativity and approaches in interacting with the differences and cultural diversity around them. Multicultural interaction in early childhood education aims to build social confidence and self-efficacy in children so that they get a clear perception that cultural differences are not the cause of division. However, it is a social phenomenon that can be the basis of interactive interaction among them.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the elements of cultural diversity in early childhood education are the main framework of pre-school pedagogy. It is fundamental for teaching in pre-school to foster awareness of the existence of community diversity. A teaching approach that is practical and appropriate to the child's psychological developmental level allows children to cultivate social skills in interacting with a variety of individuals of different values and cultural practices. In conclusion, the current study suggests that PERPADUAN Pre-school is to be one of the models for early childhood multicultural pedagogical practices.

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