MULTICULTURALISM IN ART EDUCATION: A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

By: Badrul Isa
Faculty of Education,
Universiti Teknologi MARA
MALAYSIA

bad3796@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Cultural diversity is generally accepted fact. Therefore the understanding of other cultures is crucially important and it may help to maintain the stability in society. Living in multicultural society requires a high level of understanding and respectfulness to those from other cultures. In this context one the best way to inculcate this value is through education. Art is believed to be one of the channels. Art According to Chalmer¹, in his book Celebrating Pluralism, Art Education And Cultural Diversity, noted that art is a powerful, pervasive force that helps to shape our attitude, beliefs, values and behaviors. The understanding of multiculturalism and art education concepts helps educator to build a bridge among student from a different background. This essay deals with a question on how art education can fit into the multicultural society and the implication to Malaysian art education and a study of Malaysian art education will be examined. This is to look as to whether the Malaysian art education curriculum can promote cultural awareness particularly in the effort to develop a united Malaysian society with their own identity.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Multiculturalism and Education

The movement towards multiculturalism and education has gained tremendous momentum over the past twenty years, spurring professional bodies and organizations to produce guidelines in addressing the movement and aiding professionals and experts in seeing the connections between multiculturalism and education. Barry J² asserts that
the concept of multiculturalism in education is believed to be originated in Europe and North America in which large groups of immigrants came from other countries to settle down and start their lives there. Even though these immigrants have settled in for hundreds of years, it is only in the late 1960 that the educational system felt the urge to address the different cultures and backgrounds exist in schools. The definition of multiculturalism provided by Barry is perhaps best described the scenario:

"... The view that cultural variation should be presented and transmitted in (art education in) the school system in order for children to accept it in a given society..."

Barry, J. 1992

Gardner suggests that the period of 1960s and 1970s saw an overwhelming influence the civil right movements had on educational policies, which at that time was affected by serious issues of racism. This had led to many reformations in educational system, especially in multicultural education programs including art education in school.

Generally, this has changed the focus of teaching methodology from conventional to more unique approaches in order to deliver lesson that was capable of reaching pupils of various cultures and backgrounds. Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically criticizes and addresses current shortcomings, failings and discriminatory practices that existed in education.

Multicultural education was seen as the best solution as it is grounded in ideals of social justice, educational equity and dedication in facilitating educational experiences in which all students can reach their full potential as learners in a truly holistic way. Learners are more aware of their own root, social and active beings as well as more sensitive towards other cultures, locally, nationally and even globally.
Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice. Thus, it is crucial that multiculturalism be handled properly and wisely. School can make a difference in helping inculcating human understanding, respect for diversity and peace in the society.

1.2 Multiculturalism and Art

For art to be valued, it is essential to understand what art is and how can art play an important role in developing good contact and close relationship between people of different cultures. Chalmers describes art as a “powerful, pervasive force that helps to shape our attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors.” Thus, art is not just an ordinary subject. The teaching of art in schools or in higher learning institutions, in any part of the world, is varied from one place to another.

Teaching art in Malaysian schools, for example, requires teachers to have a good foundation of understanding different cultural background of students, so that pedagogically, teachers can effectively employ different approaches to deliver art. Visiting traditional or ethnic houses could be one of the approaches, which can bring children in school to actively interact with artifacts and handicrafts.

Clarke added that the processes of art and education can be seen as the discovery, interpretation and description of culture and cultures; processes by which belief of communication and community gain values and substance through the expression of shared convention of meaning. The implementation of it, however, depended mostly on education system and curriculum, as well as educational policy, which usually developed according to the national needs.
In multicultural society the curriculum development, particularly in art education, needs to consider the cultural diversity that belongs to ethnic or group. Thus, in Malaysia’s context, the right to have a proper education, for example, is guaranteed in the constitution regardless which ethnic group they come from.

Therefore, the curriculum needs to be “culturally oriented curriculum” and not only focusing on one particular culture, regardless of how dominant that culture is. In other words, cultural diversity in art curriculum can eliminate the gap between different ethnics. The question is how art can build connection in social relationship among students in schools?

The importance of art as a subject in multicultural society has its own significance. Art subjects not only equip students with knowledge but it also has a powerful element to promote unity. It is believed that art could lead to collaborative learning, in which students work together in producing the artwork. Mural drawing or wall painting, for instance, can gather students from different ethnics to contribute ideas and produce the artwork in-group. It reduces the sense of individualism that students have and cherishes the feelings of esprit-de-corps and group accomplishment.

Art is unlike any other subjects, which sometimes require students to solve problems or issues on their own. Art is a subject that touches public response. It requires scholars to collaborate with each other in order to produce artwork. Mason viewed art subject as more likely close to culture. When culture is shared with others, others unconsciously form understanding and respect can easily be cultivated in the students.

Art has potential to assist the political, economic and social development in Malaysia and help in meeting new challenges in education system since the country’s independence in 1957. The social structure of
Malaysian society has required the government to be more concerned and sensitive towards the needs of different groups. Recognizing this fact, the National Education Philosophy was structured by taking into accounts every single need of its multicultural people.

Being a multicultural nation, any recommendations and amendment is carefully studied just to ensure that major satisfaction among races is achieved and this is definitely not an easy task. One way of collaboration is to proceed along the line with the vision of the country that is already accepted by the whole nation.

Children today live in the age where image representation and things essentially cultural have quite literally taken over everyone's lives\textsuperscript{11}. Children socialize with their friends in school and they are often exposed to visual images from other cultures. These exposures come mostly from their peers through images of their artwork presented in class.

Thus, art has become a way for children to convey information and to express their cultures\textsuperscript{12}. Cultures are portrayed and transmitted through image making, and from these images children absorb pieces about other cultures. Unlike other subjects that are confined by words and language, the abstract nature of arts makes it easier to be learnt without the boundary of language\textsuperscript{13}.

With the role art plays in instilling the awareness of other cultures, similarly, it also heightens up the sense of identity of one's own culture\textsuperscript{14}. Being a medium of communication between particular cultures or groups socially, it increases the awareness of cultural values, attitudes as well as beliefs. Hence, it is a tool that not only defines, but also instills and implants a sense of shared heritage and identity.
Transition of cultures is also reflected through art\textsuperscript{15}. Learning art in school in a multicultural environment enables the learner to study the artwork of a society or groups of different culture\textsuperscript{16}. It clearly helps learners to express their ideas, simultaneously assisting the learners to understand how others organize their significant world.

Observing and studying art objects and images from different times and places can demonstrate to learner that culture is not static\textsuperscript{17}. It develops progressively through the process of change. An artwork can describe narrative history of particular cultures and people. Significantly, by this approach learners can learn how culture can gradually change according to time as art.

1.3 Multiculturalism and Art Education
Multicultural education particularly in art education sets its goals in promoting cultural awareness, equal opportunity for learning, promoting self-identity as well as encouraging unity through diversity. The role of multicultural art education as defined by Chalmer\textsuperscript{18} is to:

- **Promote cross-cultural understanding through the identification of similarities (particularly in the roles and functions of art) within and among cultural groups.**
- **Recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate racial and cultural diversity in art within our pluralistic society, while also affirming and enhancing pride in each individual's own artistic heritage.**
- **Address through all of the art disciplines (including aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and studio production) issues of ethnocentrism, bias, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and racism.**

Chalmer\textsuperscript{19} believes that multicultural art education has its advantage in allowing students to showcase creativity, imagination, insight as well as incorporating and making history. In addition, important skills such
as be able to communicate effectively, to be creative and to be able
to criticize can be gained from the study of art and how it present
cultures.

2.0 Art Education and Multiculturalism in Malaysia

2.1 Multicultural Society in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multicultural society with rich cultural heritage where three
main races of Malays, Chinese and Indians living side by side including the
various indigenous tribes.

The Malays are the largest community who profess the Malay culture,
embrace Islam, speak the Malay language and are largely responsible for
the political fortunes of the country. The Chinese, on the other hand,
comprises about one third of the population. They are dominant in the
business community, and are mainly either Buddhists or Taoists. speak
Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese. The Indians account for about 10% of
the population. They are mainly Hindu Tamils whose ancestors can be
traced back to southern India; speak Tamil, Malayalam and some Hindi,
and live mainly in the larger towns on the west coast of the Peninsular
Malaysia.

There is also a sizeable Sikh community. Eurasians and Indigenous tribes
make up the remaining population. Being the official language of the
country, Bahasa Malaysia is used as the main medium of communication
across people of different races; they generally speak English, which was
recently reinstated as the language of instruction in higher education.

Though there are more than 20 indigenous tribe groups with each group
can be divided to not less than 5 sub-groups, indigenous tribes in Malaysia
is considered as the minorities according to their number of population.
The Constitution, however, grants these indigenous groups with equal
rights as other citizens, with the right to be protected by law, the freedom
of choosing their own faith and religion, right against force labour.
ownership to properties, education, etc. (Azhar, Azharudin, Suffian & Zulkanain, 2001).

Each sub-group of these tribes practices their own language, traditional values, economical and political systems and has their own perspective of the world: the values and lifestyles being passed from generation to generation. These make each tribe unique and rich with its own cultural heritage.

The main indigenous tribe is the Iban of Sarawak, with the total of 395,000 people. They are largely longhouse dwellers and live along the Rejang and Baram rivers. The Bidayuh (107,000) are concentrated on Sarawak’s Skrang River. The Orang Asli (80,000) live in small scattered groups in Peninsular Malaysia. They are traditionally nomadic agriculturalists, and many have been absorbed into modern Malaysia.

The tragedy of 13th May 1969 has awakened the political leaders and policy makers nationwide of the importance of integration and unity among the different races in the country. There was a strong sense of racism whereby each ethnic felt more superior than the others. This had led to major clashes between the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The tragedy had made significant impact in educational policies, whereby the politicians; policy makers and academicians felt that education system could be utilized as the main tool in promoting integration and instilling the sense of unity.

Since then, all the teachings across all school systems are geared towards uniting the people. The country’s awareness of the importance of multiculturalism and maintaining the peace and unity is positively high. Any issue that may spark racist debate is resolved amicably and peacefully, and every effort has been taken to maintain peace and stability between cultures.
Malaysia's effort in respecting cultural diversity is commendable. Recognition and respects towards differences among Malaysians are balanced with effort to minimize the effect of segregation. The ability of different groups to live together peacefully in spite of the differences they have has mapped the political system of the country in embracing the ethnic diversity and social challenges.

2.2 Art Education in Malaysian Schools

2.2.1 Pre-School (Age 6)
Children are exposed to art as early as they enter pre-school at the age of six years old. In Malaysia, pre-school education is not compulsory, though it is highly encouraged; and parents can enrol their children either in public or private kindergartens. The focus of pre-school education is to assist the children in socializing, providing a medium of transition before they enrol in primary school. The curriculum guidelines are provided to the operators by the Ministry of Education, however, the teaching is informal with the environment created to minimize inhibition in children and fostering creativity.

2.2.2 Primary School (Ages 7 to 12)
Formal education starts at the age of seven when children enter primary school. Primary school is compulsory form of education in Malaysia where children attend primary level for 6 years: progressively move from Standard 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Basically, there are two types of public schools available: the national schools and vernacular schools. Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) is the main medium of instructions in national schools, however, English is a compulsory subject. In vernacular schools, depending on whether Chinese or Indian vernacular school, Chinese or Tamil is used as the main medium of instruction; Malay and English languages are compulsory subjects.
The teaching of primary school is based on the Integrated Curriculum For Primary School (ICPS). The curriculum is designed based on the national education policy, stresses on four aspect of education:

- An integrated approach
- Individual holistic development
- Equal education for all
- Life long education.

The most important aspect of all these four is the integrated approach, which serves as the main focus in the design of ICPS. Integrated approach incorporates the element of knowledge, skills and values in fostering the integrated development of intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of the individuals.

From the perspective of art and multiculturalism, this aspect is manifested as integration of knowledge and practice. For instance knowledge acquired can put into practice outside the formal classroom situation. In this matter a visit or art workshop can help pupils to collaborate each other.

Art education in primary school begins when art subject is introduced to standard one student. One of the objectives for art education in primary school is to inculcate the cooperative values, confidence and cultural enhancement through art activities.

At this level, students are introduced with art form of craftworks such as ethnic mask, relief sculptures, origami, and Malay craft. In line with the introduction to these objects, students learn the process of producing material and decorative elements in the ethnic artwork as well as the profound individuals behind the creation of well-known craftworks.

As described by Chalmers\textsuperscript{50}, teachers are encouraged to introduce the students to profound figures in arts throughout history and across cultures
so that the students aware of the narrative history of art. Art teachers are also encouraged to be creative in varying their teaching approach through incorporating the art of other ethnics.

2.2.3 Secondary School Education (Ages 13-17)

After the students finish their primary school at the age of 12, they progress to Form 1 in secondary school. Secondary school provides 5 years of education, for students age 13 to 17. Secondary school education in Malaysia comprises of two levels:

i. Lower secondary level (Form 1 to 3, ages 13 – 15)

ii. Upper secondary level (Form 4 to 5, ages 16 – 17)

Throughout the three years in lower secondary level, students learn general subjects and art is offered as an elective subject. The upper secondary education offers more specialized fields of study, where, depending on the qualifications they gained during the Lower Secondary Examination, students can decide to choose their own stream of studies:

1. The Science or Arts stream in academic (regular) schools or religious schools
2. Technical or Vocational Schools
4. Special Education Schools (for visually or hearing impaired students)

Malaysia also offers two other types of public schools, namely:

i. Smart Schools
   One of the seven flagship applications of the Multimedia Supper Corridor (MSC), which uses information communication and technology (ICT) in the learning and teaching process

ii. Sports Schools aims at nurturing and developing athletic potential among school students
The aim and objectives of secondary education as outlined by Curriculum Development Centre (2002) is as follows:

`... To further develop the potential of the individual in holistic, balanced, and integrated manner encompassing the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects in order to create a balanced and harmonious human being with high moral standards.`

To achieve this, education at the secondary level is geared towards enabling students to,

- **Understand, be aware of and appreciate the history as well the socio-cultural milieu of the country.**
- **Upgrade their competence in and usage of Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) as the official and national language towards the acquisition of knowledge and the achievement of national unity**
- **Develop a sense of responsibility and to be prepared to serve religion and nation.**

Art education in secondary level is a continuity of what had been taught in the primary level. At secondary level, students are exposed to ethncial costumes as well as ethnic crafts, calligraphy and indigenous art objects.

There is a strong focus of cultural heritage and students are required to produce art portfolio, which involves some elements of research to be conducted, pertaining to the areas specified (i.e. art appreciation, craft, art making, modern art). These areas often have cross-cultural element. Producing the portfolio helps the students to better appreciate art as they understand the history and move through various stages in responding to art.\(^\text{21}\).
3.0 Multiculturalism In Malaysian Art Education

Being a plural country, there is the urgency of inculcating the spirit of multiculturalism from the early age as possible. This realization has led to the formation of unique policy of multiculturalism in the educational sector. Though two types of schooling exist (national school and vernacular school), the same policy is applied to all types of schools.

3.1 The Malaysian Educational Policy

Since independence, education has always been given first priority and essential in developing skilful and sufficient manpower needed in building the nation. The designing and crafting of any educational policy will finally depend on the type of society we wish to develop. The future of nation does depend greatly on the education system of the country.

It should begin with strong foundation of primary level of education and to be followed by systematic secondary education, supported by competitive but flexible tertiary system. Education bring changes to civilization of a nation, thus it should be viewed in a more complete and holistic approach.

Thus, Malaysian educational system is designed to suit the country’s aspiration in realizing a better working structure and to meet future challenges globally. To achieve this, the major goals of any educational programme and activities are:

1. Equip students with the essential skills in a holistic and integrated manner, in order to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced; as well as functionally literate;
2. Inculcate and nurture national consciousness by promoting common ideals, values, aspirations and loyalties to foster national unity and national identity;

3. Produce skilled manpower for economic and national development; instill desired moral values in students so that they can contribute effectively towards nation building.

3.2 National Ideology, The Rukunegara

Any policy designed has to conform the National Ideology or commonly referred to as the 'Rukunegara'. It is a country's common principle, developed to address Malaysia's aspiration of unity and development, to unite Malaysians and to create a sense of responsibility within each citizen. The principles of Rukunegara are outlined below:

- Belief in God
- Loyalty to King and Country
- Upholding the Constitution
- Rule of Law
- Good Behavior and Morality

The underlying objectives of Rukunegara are

- To develop a united nation within a plural society
- To develop a democratic society through a constitutionally elected parliament
- To develop a just society with equal opportunities for all
- To develop a liberal society of diverse cultural traditions
- To develop a progressive society oriented towards science and modern technology
Rukunegara stipulates that:

“To develop a liberal society of diverse cultural traditions”

Malaysian government with the collaboration of non-governmental organizations is working hard towards developing a liberal society. This is a matter of importance, as liberal society can help maintain the stability of the country. One of the ways to achieve this is through the equality in learning. The educational system is designed to promote a united, democratic, just, liberal and progressive society.24

3.3 The National Philosophy of Education.

The National Philosophy of Education emphasizes the development of quality individual who will later contribute to the development of nation and society.

National Philosophy of Education states:

“Education in Malaysia is on going effort toward further developing the potential individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief and devotion to god.

Such an effort is designed to produced Malaysian citizen who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation at large”

Art education in Malaysia has undergone a tremendous change since the independence. In 1980’s, a new national curriculum was introduced in primary and secondary levels. The New Curriculum for Primary School was
introduced in 1982 and the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary School was introduced in 1988. These new curricula are in line with several government policies, aims and objectives in education that were reviewed as early as 1970's and various education reforms that were introduced ever since.25

3.4 Aims and Objectives of Art Education In Malaysia.

Art education in Malaysia in both primary and secondary levels, aims in producing students who are artistically knowledgeable, imaginative, critical minded, aesthetically balanced, appreciative of their traditional heritage in line with technological advancement and be able to apply knowledge of art gained, towards the betterment of life and the development of the nation.26 The aims of art education in Malaysia is translated into five strands of art education, which are,

- Creative expression
- Design, Produce and Present
- Aesthetic Perception
- Aesthetic Valuing
- Cultural Craft And Visual Heritage

There are seven primary objectives of art education in Malaysia. These objectives serve as guidelines the for art teachers. These objectives enable the students to:

- Develop the ability in expressing inner perception and ideas through inventive habits and thinking
- Develop communication and interaction abilities and at the same time enhance visual skills and understandings through designing, producing and presenting activities
- Develop sensitivity and awareness towards what is seen, heard, touched, felt and experienced
- Develop the ability to appreciate, evaluate, analyze and discuss the production of various types of art and visual production.
- Enhance knowledge of related traditional and cultural crafts as well as visual art heritage or other cultural inheritance.
- Use multimedia and information technology to design artworks and acquire knowledge
- Apply knowledge of art gained towards the betterment of life and the development of the nation.

Designed and developed to develop an awareness of cultural heritage of others. In this case one of the main objectives of art education in Malaysia is to:

"Enhance knowledge of related traditional and cultural crafts as well as visual art heritage or other cultural inheritance."

The primary objective above emphasizes on the importance of creating an awareness of other cultural heritage among the various ethnicities in Malaysia. This could be achieved through art activities in school, which normally are conducted by teachers in primary and secondary school.

"Apply knowledge of art gained towards the betterment of life and the development of the nation."

3.5 Art Education and National Identity

The concept of "Equality of learning" applies to all individuals regardless of their ethnicities or backgrounds. It allows every student to receive equal opportunity for developing their potential. To ensure the 'equality of learning' is achieved, every aspect of education has to be geared in accomplishing this objective:
• Teachers must be prepared to effectively facilitate learning for every individual student, no matter how culturally similar or different from her or himself.
• Schools must be active participants in ending oppression of all types, first by ending oppression within their own walls, then by producing socially and critically active and aware students.
• Education must become more fully student-centered and inclusive of the voices and experiences of the students.
• Educators, activists, and others must take a more active role in re-examining all educational practices and how they affect the learning of all students: testing methods, teaching approaches, evaluation and assessment, school psychology and counseling, educational materials and textbooks, etc.

4.0 Conclusion

As a multiracial country, Malaysia has developed its own mould in multicultural education. Realizing the importance of integrating and uniting the various races and ethnicities, education has been utilized as the main tool. Instead of assuming that every citizen in the country is similar, the country acknowledges the differences in culture and lifestyle its people have, and the people are inculcated with values to respect these differences. One way to teach these values is through reaching the young generations in schools.

Art education is a unique subject where the cultural differences of students are portrayed, thus these differences can be manipulated to increase students' awareness on the various cultures, and eventually they are taught to respect these differences. Through well-trained art teachers who fully understand the nation's aspiration, supported by the National Education Philosophy and educational policies established, the younger generations are instilled with the values of creating a united, democratic, just, liberal and progressive society. Therefore, multicultural curriculum of
art education goes beyond the mere objective of producing students who have high sense of creativity and appreciative of art, but high level of awareness and respect towards other people and cultures.
References


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