

Professional Principal Training Related to the Implementation of Multicultural Early Childhood Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in the document of Malaysian national philosophy of education. It affirms our need to prepare children for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role preschools can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. The very important prerequisite of preschool education principals is their professional development in order to have full understanding of multicultural preschool education practice which require them to value a diverse, multicultural, multilingual and multiracial society. We cannot deny that apart from their own family and teachers, principals who administer the children's services have potential impact on children's developing attitudes towards cultural diversity more than others in a child's life. Therefore it is essential that preschool principals undergo and receive appropriate professional training which incorporate the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for such a responsibility. Principals must be multiculturally literate and capable of including and embracing families and communities to create an environment that is supportive of multiple perspectives, experiences, and democracy. This paper will discuss the findings of a study on multicultural preschool education and principals' professional training conducted in Malaysia. The aim of the study is to determine the extent to which the preschool principals' professional training assists them when they incorporate multicultural education in their preschool management. A survey was conducted including 67 preschool principals in Kedah state, northern part of Malaysia. The data was collected through questionnaire using four point Likert scale. Quantitative analysis was employed to obtain the answers related to preschool principals' professional training when incorporating multicultural education in organizational practices.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Professional Training, Preschool Principal

Introduction

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural nation. Diversity is a common feature of its people. The majority ethnic groups comprising the Malays, Chinese, and Indians have lived in harmony for decades. However, within the era of globalization, Malaysians require further competency in interacting with diverse people from around the world (Nooreiny and Zuria, 2003). In light of this, the education of the citizens need to include awareness of diversity and pluralism and how to enhance understanding of people from different ethnic, religious, cultural, and political background (Nooreiny and Zuria, 2003).

Multicultural education includes education about diversity and change. As its core is the idea that each student has an equal chance of learning in school regardless of the student's gender, social class, ethnic, racial, or cultural attributes (Banks & Banks, 2003: 3). In Malaysia, although there is no specific course or subject conducted in schools on multicultural education, the school curriculum includes issues and topics on tolerance and racial understanding toward people from diverse backgrounds in subjects such as moral and religious studies. Principals as arbiters of change should first be made aware of diversity and should have competency in intercultural interactions. Therefore, principal professional training programs may need to include a multicultural component to its curriculum to help prepare principals to deal with diversity in the classroom and provide principals to have an in-depth understanding of how to become a multicultural principals.

Teaching with a multicultural perspective encourages appreciation and understanding of other cultures as well as one's own. Teaching with this perspective promotes the child's sense of the uniqueness of his own culture as a positive characteristic and enables the child to accept the uniqueness of the cultures of others (Gomez, 1991). Early childhood educators can influence the development of positive attitudes in young children by learning about and promoting the various cultures represented among the children they teach. Children's attitudes toward their race and ethnic group and other cultural groups begin to form early in the preschool years (Gomez, 1991).

Managing diversity should be a comprehensive, holistic process for developing an environment that works for all concerned. The purpose of valuing diversity and appreciating differences is not simply to make people feel good about each other, preschools have a specific purpose for existing, to implement their mission through whatever product or service they provide. Thus bringing interactional change at the individual level is only half of the process. The major problem with most staff development programs or trainings for multicultural education is that the unit of change on which they focus is the individual rather than the institution as an organization. Such change must be paralleled by a change in the culture and structure of the preschool.

What kind of training does a preschool principal need? Most often, a preschool principal career begins with being a teacher. After gaining educational experience, the preschool teacher may decide to get more schooling and pursue a job as a preschool principal. Malaysian Ministry of Education require preschool principal to obtain either an preschool education degree or other equivalent training.

Background of the Study

In Malaysia, preschool education is not part of the formal education system and is provided by several government agencies which cater for children aged 4-6. All preschool centers need to register with the Ministry of Education. Mostly preschool education in Malaysia is conducted by the private sector in the urban areas and various government agencies. Therefore, a large number of governments and social agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, Ministry of Rural Development and several state departments have taken the responsibility for the care of preschool aged children. Following the World Summit for Children in 1990, the report, *Caring for the Children of Malaysia -National Plan of Action for Child Survival, Protection and Development* was prepared and approved by the Cabinet in 1994. This served as the blueprint for the development and formulation of policies, programs, and strategies for children up to the year 2000.

Preschool education is conducted mainly by the government, then by NGOs as well as private social organizations. The government operated 81.6 percent of the preschool programs in 1995. Of these, the Community Development Division of the Ministry of Rural Development has operated 61.8 percent of the preschool programs. A total of 9.5 percent of the preschool program are operated by the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development and 10.3 percent by the Ministry of Education. The other 18.4 percent are operated by the private sector. Public preschool programs are free to parents and fully funded by the government while private programs charge fees.

Coverage for preschool education has improved dramatically from 17 percent of 4-6 year olds in 1981 to 41.5 percent in 1995 over the last decade-and-one-half. However, the Malaysian report notes that in comparison with the full and universal coverage of primary school education, there is still need for further improvement. Furthermore, with the Education Act 1996, preschool education was made a part of the national education system. Preschool education was incorporated into the compulsory education system that was introduced at this time, and has come to function as a social welfare or relief measure for children from relatively poor families who are unable to attend primary school or to attend it regularly or for children from low-income families who are primarily ethnic minorities.

Now the focus is on expanding preschool programs with a particular stress on stimulating cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development. A Cabinet Committee has been formed comprising the Ministries of Education, National Unity and Social Development, and Rural Development with the goal of enabling all preschool-aged children to participate. One problem in moving towards universal preschool coverage is geographical issue. Part of East Malaysia can be accessed largely only by air or rivers, through heavy forest and across mountains.

Although the Ministry of Education does not fund and operate all the preschools in Malaysia, it does have responsibility to prepare the preschool curriculum for all. It also carries on preschool teacher and principal professional training, register preschool centers. In general, Ministry of Education have to implementing preschool education. The NGOs involved in preschools include: the Malaysian Kindergarten Association, the Malaysian Association of Child Care Providers, the Malaysian Council for Child Welfare, and the National Association of Preschool Teachers.

One characteristic of Malaysia is its ethnic diversity due to its population comprises Malays as well as Chinese, Indian and indigenous peoples. The education system is organized to reflect this ethnic diversity in consideration of these ethnic groups. The aim of preschool education is to educate citizens with high-level skills and competency in a global society.

Preschool education in Malaysia is positioned as the preparatory stage for primary school education. As such, the curriculum of preschool education promotes national unification among ethnic groups while preparing children for primary school education. For example, although the significance of learning English from an early age is emphasized, the ability to communicate in the official language of Malay is also given importance. At the same time, consideration is also given to the languages other than Malay that are spoken by non-Malays. Moreover, the practice of Islamic and other moral values is also important. In this respect, the preschool curriculum is organized to develop competent human resources with the dual aims of uniting the Malaysian people and promoting economic development (Sugimoto, 2005; Tejima, 2006).

Statement of Problem

The training and qualifications required of preschool teachers and administrators vary widely in Malaysia. Both teacher-training colleges and universities offer pre-service training programs. The universities offer two types of pre-service teacher training programs: a one-year post-graduate diploma in education, and four-year integrated bachelor's degree course. Similarly, teacher-training colleges offer a six-semester (three years) diploma in teaching programs, and a one-year (two semesters) post-graduate diploma in teaching for university graduates who wish to enter the field of education. Teacher training for preschool (kindergarten) teachers is also provided by the Ministry of Education, whereas training for child minders is provided by Ministry of Rural and Regional Development and the Department of Social Welfare. Although preschool teachers and principals are required to attend formal training or special course before being permitted to teach, it is not clear that how long the training is or what it consists of apart from pedagogy and educational psychology. Nor is it clear what the content of the preschool curriculum is, nor the duration of the school day and year and whether it functions as a child care program as well.

Training is conducted at Teacher Training Colleges under the Ministry of Education or other relevant ministries and government departments. To this end, the MOE has trained 178 trainers from the Community Development Division (KEMAS) of the National Unity Development. These trainers in turn train other teachers. The government through its agencies also provide trained teachers and principals, teaching-learning materials, and funds to facilitate running of the public preschools. However, to what extent is the training emphasizes elements of multicultural education is uncertain. It is important that the training courses should have elements in both content and delivery that address diversity of cultural. In addition, preschool principals should also be assisted to engage in professional development, which enables them to examine their own values and assumptions in relation to race, culture, class, sexuality and gender and the impact these may have on their practice. It is essential that preschool principals undergo and receive appropriate training or staff development programs that incorporate the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for such a responsibility.

Early childhood education needs a lot of support (Kwon YI, 2002). Preschool children are vulnerable and need proper care and education for an appropriate stimulation and learning. A formal professional advancement is pertinent for the development of preschool principals for providing quality care and education. (Kabita Bose, 2008). Saluja & Clifford (2002) found that the principals in high quality settings have more specialized training in early childhood education and child development and they are more informed about developmentally appropriate practices and management strategies for use with young children.

Country like Malaysia whose population is made up many different cultural communities that the issue of multicultural education seems pertinent. However with the phenomenon of transmigration, the world becoming a borderless village, increasing interdependence among countries, and more tragic and spectacular events like 9/11 and the ominous threat of the 'clash of the civilizations', the issue of multiculturalism and its place in education is becoming more important.

Literature Review

Multicultural Education

Banks and Banks (1995) define multicultural education is a field of study and an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for children from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. One of its important goals is to help all children to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and community that works for the common good.

Gorski and Covert (2000: 1) outlined a number of ideals of multicultural education which they perceive as a process of transformation. Some of these include the idea of equal opportunity for students to achieve to his/her potential; students' ability to participate in an intercultural society; the ability of teachers to facilitate learning for diverse students; the active participation of administrators to end all types of oppression; for education to be fully student-centered; for society to take an active part in reexamining educational practices including students learn, are taught, and assessed, and materials and texts used.

The term multicultural education has only recently become a part of issues on professional training although the idea has been around for decades (Rasool and Curtis, 2000). In Malaysia, multicultural education is not explicitly taught in professional training programs at all (Nooreiny and Zuria, 2003). The nation's education philosophy implicitly addresses issues of multicultural education in the form of statements which stresses the need to uphold tolerance and respect for people from diverse ethnic groups. Tolerance and respect for diversity is also spelled out in the syllabus of subjects such as moral studies and religious studies. Moral values and tolerance is only indirectly addressed in school textbooks in the form of inclusion of multicultural names and observance of religious or cultural festivals.

Requirements for Early Childhood Administrators

Principals can better serve culturally diverse students by understanding diversity and respecting individuality. Moreover, early childhood educators should possess three

elements namely personal commitment, knowledge of what makes a difference and educational leadership (Mei-Yi Chen, 2010).

There is no short cut to accomplish educational equality for Malaysia's culturally diverse populations. In addition, working with children and their families with diverse cultures is challenging and can be difficult. Principals need to have sincere and wholehearted commitment in order to make significant progress. Such commitment can be tough but is necessary for educators in dealing with a variety of issues in the multicultural classrooms and in meeting the challenge of diverse groups of children.

Garcia's (1995) study findings for early childhood contribute important knowledge to general instructional organization, literacy development, academic achievement in content areas and the perspectives of children, parents, and educators. Therefore, principals should recognize that academic development has its roots in sharing knowledge and experiences through communication. Within the knowledge-driven curriculum, skills are tools for acquiring knowledge, not an essential goal of teaching events. Principals need to move beyond national educational goals. Educational leadership is needed to spread new knowledge, to apply new knowledge to skill development, and to engage in childhood development.

Research Objectives

- a. To assess the adequacy of professional principal training and development for multicultural education.
- b. To identify strengths and inadequacies from their principal professional training based on the principals' point of views.

Methodology

This study is predominantly a survey utilizing self-report questionnaire among preschool principals in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. According to Borg and Gall (1989) assumption made in a survey is that descriptive data gathered at one time is normal and in a similar situation can be replicated in future. They further stated that a descriptive research is basically related to comprehend the current situation and emphasize the exact circumstances of a population. Thus, survey method is appropriate in explaining respondent's perception in a study (Leedy, 1992).

This study is a survey on preschool principals' perception on the adequacy of their professional training in order to managing preschool multicultural education. This research utilizes quantitative research methodology involving a sample of 67 preschool principals. The questionnaires were mailed to 70 preschool principals in the Kedah state, northern part of Malaysia. The return rate was 95.7 percent (67) of the total number of questionnaires distributed. A purposive sampling was employed by selected samples randomly from each of the different type of preschool such as government, quasi-government and private centers. This data was obtained from the Preschool Education Division, Ministry of Education. A total of 70 preschool principals were selected from the population of principals who are working in various types of preschools in Kedah state.

The questionnaire consists of 20 items and were measured with a four point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The respondents need to indicate the degree of agreement towards the adequacy of principal professional training while managing preschool multicultural education. A structured self-administered mailed survey questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. Descriptive measures such as mean, standard deviation and percentages were used to describe the variables in this study.

Findings

Respondents Background

The total number of respondents in this study is 67 preschool principals. The respondents comprise of 45 from Annex preschool, 12 from private commercial preschool, 8 from National Unity and Social Development preschool and 2 from religious preschool. However, their experience in teaching preschool range from do not have any experience to 30 years of experience. Furthermore, their administrative experience in preschool range from 2 months to 32 years.

As displayed in the Table 1, demographic data revealed that the respondents in this study were not equivalent in gender, consisting of 65.2 percent female and 34.8 percent male. Teaching profession especially in preschool found to be more suitable to female than male. The respondents age groups as indicated by the demographic data range from less than 25 years old to more than 55 years old. The biggest percentage (47.7%) of the respondents were from age groups of 47 to 55 years old. This indicated that majority of the respondents in this study were older generation. Only 4.6 percent of the respondents were less than 25 years old. This situation happened due to the appointment of preschool principals based on their seniority.

In relation to the respondents' level of education, demographic data indicates that the respondents' level of education range from lower secondary certificate (PMR/SRP/LCE) to degree qualification. The vast majority of the respondents which is 35.9 percent in this study, completed until the upper secondary school (SPM/MCE/GCE) as their highest education attainment level, followed by degree qualification 25.0 percent, diploma 23.4 percent, Higher School Certificate (STPM/HSC/A Level/ Matriculation) 14.1 percent, and 1.6 percent lower secondary school (PMR/SRP/LCE).

Majority of the respondents were Malay ethnicity (81.5%), this is followed by Chinese ethnicity (14.3%) and 4.8 percent were Indian. Therefore, most of them were using Malay language as their first language (81.5%). A total of 10.8 percent were using Mandarin as their first language. There were 4.6 percent of the respondents whose first language is English and 3.1 percent of them who speak Tamil as their first language.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Types of institutions		
Annex	45	67.2
National Unity & Social Development	8	11.9
Private Commercial	12	17.9
Religious	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0
Gender		
Male	23	34.8
Female	43	65.2
Missing value	1	
Total	67	100.0
Age		
<25 years old	3	4.6
26-35 years old	11	16.9
36-45 years old	12	18.5
46-55 years old	31	47.7
>55 years old	8	12.3
Missing value	5	
Total	67	100.0
Ethnicity		
Malay	51	81.0
Chinese	9	14.3
Indian	3	4.8
Missing value	4	
Total	67	100.0
First Language		
Malay	53	81.5
English	3	4.6
Mandarin	7	10.8
Tamil	2	3.1
Missing value	2	
Total	67	100.0
Educational Level		
PMR/SRP/LCE	1	1.6
SPM/MCE/GCE	23	35.9
STPM/HSC/A level/Matriculation	9	14.1
Diploma	15	23.4
Degree	16	25.0
Missing value	3	
Total	67	100.0

Adequacy of Professional Principal Training in Development for Multicultural Education

Table 2 showed that generally preschool principals agree to strongly agree that professional training that they gained assists them while managing multicultural preschool education. This is reflected in the overall mean of 2.98 to 3.45 which is approximately right between ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ about the principal professional training do help them to manage the cultural diversity of their preschool children. The results for the level of agreement are given below.

Table 2 also indicated that the strengths of the principal professional training is to provide the awareness and skills in managing diversity. Awareness on equity among children, diverse cultural background, fairness, cultural diversity, recognition on cultural diversity and cultural development are highly emphasized in the principal professional training. Principal professional training are also provide them with the skills needed to prevent prejudices, skills to help students to have positive relationships with other ethnic groups, skills to implement multicultural education, managing dealing skills and skills of acceptance.

However, principal professional training seems to be inadequacy in equipping those principals with the techniques, strategies and individual intention to handling problems raised from multicultural issues. Thus, the preschool principals can be considered quite lacking while managing tensions between different ethnic groups, incorporate multicultural education when only one cultural perspective is presented, do not have appropriate strategies to use while working with children from different ethnic groups, ways to integrate multicultural education in preschool and techniques for motivating children with different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, most principals have problems to understand the effect of family culture on the children’s performance, using effective methods to teach children from different ethnic groups, meeting both the academic and emotional needs of children from different ethnic groups, meeting the needs of diverse groups and children from different ethnic groups found to be comfortable with principals.

Table 2: Training in Development Multicultural Education

Constructs	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ensure equity in education among children	3.45	0.535
Transform the school environment to meet the needs of children from diverse cultural background	3.42	0.498
Not to be biased when dealing with children from from any particular ethnic group	3.38	0.558
Able to provide me the skills needed to prevent me having prejudices against children from other ethnic groups	3.35	0.551

Able to provide me the skills to help students have positive relationships with others from different ethnic background	3.33	0.512
Acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement multicultural education	3.32	0.602
Trained to vary my managing methods when dealing with children from different ethnic groups	3.32	0.540
Able to assist me to recognize the cultural diversity among children	3.31	0.573
Able to develop cultural awareness	3.30	0.566
Trained to accept the cultural diversity among children	3.30	0.537
Children from different ethnic groups will be comfortable with me as their administrator	3.29	0.624
Enables me to meet the needs of diverse groups found in school	3.28	0.526
Trained to meet both the academic and emotional needs of children from different ethnic groups	3.24	0.576
Able to provide me with effective methods to teach children from different ethnic groups	3.23	0.504
Able to provide me with skills to understand the effect of family culture on the students' performance	3.23	0.539
Acquire the techniques for motivating children from different ethnic groups	3.22	0.534
Able to provide me with ways to integrate multicultural education in the school	3.21	0.563
Able to provide me with appropriate strategies to use when working with children from different ethnic groups	3.18	0.543

Trained to incorporate multicultural education when only one cultural perspective is presented	3.05	0.650
Trained to manage tensions between different ethnic groups	2.98	0.678

Discussion

It is the very important prerequisite of early childhood education staff is their recruitment and professional development. Few can deny that apart from their own family, staff especially principal working in children's services potentially impact on children's developing attitudes towards cultural diversity more than any other persons in a child's life. Therefore, it is essential that principal undergo and receive appropriate training or staff development programs which incorporate the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for such a responsibility. However for those countries like Malaysia who have only just recognized the importance of having a strong foundation by having quality early childhood education, the picture might not be as encouraging. It has been shown by this study that many principals have only upper secondary school education, without and specialized training in early childhood education.

Preschool principals play a crucial role in fostering multicultural understanding in preschool. Administrating, as a profession of conscience, needs to have principals who are able to provide quality education to all children. Principals who lack multicultural education knowledge and competence have been found to be ill-prepared for the realities of a world characterized by pluralism and have the tendency to have "low expectations of minority children" (Chisholm, 1994: 43).

Results of this study seem to show that principals in preschool require in-depth knowledge and skills to assist them in their administration in a preschool of diverse learners. Majority of preschool principals did agree that they have the knowledge about the equality and be able to transform the preschool environment to meet the needs of diverse children's background but they are quite lacking how to manage tensions between different ethnic groups. It is suggested that further explore in-depth the relevance and need for a multicultural education to integrate into the principal professional training syllabus.

Conclusion

A deliberate and conscious effort has to be undertaken to promote respect and not just mere tolerance for differences, including cultural ones which make up the most contentious of differences amongst mankind. Culture is after all the sum total of what makes one distinct from others of a different culture. If the mankind is to live in harmony and goodwill, then they have to come to terms with these differences. Coming to terms will need education, and the best time to start with this education is right from the start in early childhood. The ultimate aim of education today is the education of the nations' citizen who can work and live peacefully within a world of diversity.

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