Social Learning & Interaction in Multicultural Settings – The Malaysian Experience

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Politics of Education Malaysia (1)

• Vernacular Schools
• National Schools


[T]he ultimate object of educational policy in the country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national educational system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction, though we recognise that progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual.

Education Act 1961

• One national language; vernacular schools at primary level; national schools at secondary level
• Independent Chinese schools (60) allowed without govt support

National Language Act 1967
Politics of Education Malaysia
(2)

Contentions of Vernacular Schools
- Role of Chinese educationists (Dong Jiao Zong)
- Medeka University rejected 1982
- 1987 protest over senior assistants and political detentions

Education Act 1996, liberalization of higher education
- Rise of private colleges (IPTS), e.g. New Era College 1998
- 20 public universities
- Increased class & ethnic segregation in higher education

New Issues circa 2018
- Non recognition of degrees from China/Taiwane se/Hong Kong universities, non-acceptance of UEC of Independent Schools for university entrance
Multicultural Citizenship

Nation-states are social constructs; two concepts are Imagined Communities (B. Anderson) and Nations-in-Intent (A.B. Shamsul).

Settler societies and post-colonial formations are multinational, polyethnic or both, e.g. Canada, Malaysia (Kymlicka).

Malaysia is a federal entity with national groups (Malays & other Bumiputera), indigenous groups (Orang Asli) and ethnic groups (Chinese, Indians & others).

Multicultural citizenship in Malaysia could well be premised on “equal worth” & “equal rights” of individuals, self-determination of groups, protection of minority rights, protection of indigenous groups and, arguably, affirmative action for Bumiputera as specified constitutionally.
Universities as Sites of Multicultural Learning

Character of universities – IPTA and IPTS

Ethnic segregation highly evident; UiTM 100% Bumiputera; New Era College 100% Chinese

The majority of public universities are mixed but vary in policy

Public universities have a policy of mixed enrolments largely following ethnic distribution subject to NEP strictures.

University cafeteria, sporting activities, student associations, etc. are common sites of but ethnic mixing occurs within constraints varying from inclusive to exclusive (sports fields contra mosques)

Students find own ethnic comfort zones inside and outside campuses; university policies reinforce segregation or do not really encourage ethnic mixing

Macalister College studies (2002), particularly findings of Ellen Guyer (2002) show ethnic segregation
Met and talked with two Chinese women students who talked about Malay favoritism and don’t interact much or at all with Malays.

Observe no common space to interact or to socialise in Student Centre. Spoke with two Malay women students who seem reluctant to talk about ethnic relations.

Concludes that attempts to address ethnic segregation are not successful. Affirmative action policies entrench ethnic differences.
The Ethnic Relations Module

The ethnic relations module, a top-down policy instrument of cross-cultural learning implemented at all universities.

Began with controversy. The first module used by UPM (2006) earned the ire of Indian community & opposition politicians because of its biased narrative on 1969 Race Riots and the 2001 Kg Medan Incident of ethnic violence.

Khalim Zainal et al. (2009) on Ethnic Relations Module. Study of 320 students; positive findings; some mingling and social learning was in evidence (video camera used to observe students).

Multiculturalism & Higher Education by Rozita Ibrahim et al. (2011); ethnic polarization said to be declining (Mansor, Zaharah studies); Ethnic Relations module and Malaysian Studies have been important tools in creating multicultural awareness and learning.

AB Shamsul’s role under Abdullah government as chief editor. Shamsul was tasked with editing the new module. Shamsul then established KITA (Ethnic Relations Institute at UKM).
Prof. A.B. Shamsul (UKM)

The module has had a positive impact; believes that multicultural social learning is a “conscientization process”. The role and initiative of teachers and students is crucial to this process.

Prof. Mansor Mohd Noor (KITA, UKM)

Module requires an update; believes that social learning occurs on sites of common social intercourse and that social and ethnic boundaries are “thin” not “thick” in Malaysia. The politicization of education has affected ethnic relations.

Prof. Terence Gomez (UM)

Recalls the academic staff union having discussions with University authorities over module; academics thought it was the wrong approach to address ethnic relations; as university wide course, it had too many students; was hard to find competent (sociology) lecturers.

IMU medical student

Compulsory ethnic relations course for the student to pass; the lecturer was hired from outside; students didn’t gain much only wanted to get over it; most impactful part was the showing of the movie “Sepet” (by the late Yasmin Ahmad) about interracial romance.

**Four Reflections**
In some 35 years as a university lecturer and professor at USM, I have seen a metamorphosis in interaction and social learning in universities which has transitioned from a more multicultural basis to one premised more on ethnic divides.

The main factor for this is the changing demographics in universities. In the 1970s, students were small in numbers and came form ‘national’ mostly English-based schooling. The different ethnic groups showed a great propensity to mix in the common sites of interaction. There was a more ‘liberal’ environment of social learning because of more moderate attitudes of fewer religious strictures especially in Islam.

By the 1980s, a shift occurred and student populations increasingly were from two overall sets: those from more rural settings and those from the more urban environments and increasingly students ‘polarised’ according to ethnic schooling streams. University associations reflected this. Cafeteria mixing became less evident. University policies premised on NEP also made cafeterias increasingly monocultural. Non-Malay students would go outside the campus for their food and recreation. Not just among students but the ethnic mixing among lecturers also seem to increasing follow such a pattern. (Guyer’s observations are apropos).

From the 1990s onwards till today, the pattern has been reinforced. Since the mid 1990s because of the mushrooming of IPTS, more affluent middle class non-Malay (and also Malay) parents and students have relegated public universities to a second class status. The trend continues till today. Universities are therefore less important as a site of multicultural social mixing and social learning today.

The ethnic relations module, a noble effort at creating ‘bridging social capital’, does too little too late. I would suggest that social learning and interaction has to start at least at the secondary school level if not earlier. A social studies course needs to be introduced in national schools. Many other policies could also be introduced as suggested by several studies on multicultural education. Such a move would serve the objective of creating a “New Malaysia”.

Final Reflections