

Promoting a multi-cultural education program in private colleges in Malaysia: a personal view

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Introduction

The private education industry in Malaysia is playing a very significant role in the development of human resources, in line with the goals stated in Vision 2020. Private education institutions have mushroomed and proliferated throughout the country. Most of these private institutions provide courses catering to internationally recognized professional, technical, and academic qualifications. Since many of the courses offered are foreign-based, the significance to Malaysia is in the savings in the outflow of Malaysian currency.

Most of the students attending private colleges in Malaysia, particularly in those institutions in the Klang Valley, are bilinguals. The Malaysian students and their other foreign college mates form the multi-racial and multi-cultural set-up that can be harnessed and, with proper planning, can become a significant source of human development and national unity.

Multi-culturalism

The multi-cultural nature of many private colleges in Malaysia translates itself into a challenging and interesting working environment for the teachers. Of course, almost every classroom is made up of individuals with multiple and complex perspectives. This complexity, however, is often compounded for the teachers as their students originate from a wide variety of ethnic and family backgrounds. With the current prevalent development in private education in Malaysia, the trend in cultural diversity in the private colleges is expected to continue.

In order to prepare classroom instruction to be culturally meaningful, many teachers have expressed the need to prepare their students for interaction with people from different backgrounds. This need can be viewed in the form of a multi-cultural exposure that emphasizes on the acceptance and appreciation of the different cultural values of each and every society of the world. A multi-cultural education program therefore opens eyes, minds, and hearts to different lifestyles, speech habits, traditions, and ways of interacting and enjoying life.

A multi-cultural education program teaches students to appreciate and to respect others rather than fear cultural differences. The general aim of such a program is NOT to incite racism but rather to teach people to value differences within themselves as

well as between themselves and others who possess different values. A total multi-cultural approach to instruction stresses the strengths of all ethnic groups and attempts to incorporate an understanding of the different cultural values into the teaching of all subjects.

To many educators, multi-cultural education does not mean just learning about other cultural groups through just listening to prepared lectures and reading assigned materials within the classroom. At times, it means going into other cultural communities, experiencing and sharing what they offer of their ways of living, their pleasures and their griefs, and helping these communities through understanding, friendship, support, and genuine caring for their contributions to community life.

In itself, the general current private college education system of education does not necessarily lead to an appreciation of the values and viewpoints of those of another culture. Indeed, on the whole, the cultural values of most of our private college students have not been consciously acquired, and confrontation with other values can be a shocking experience: the new ways and viewpoints may seem "wrong" or "bad" or "rude." Sometimes, such an emotional revulsion to differences may be intensified by teaching materials that present stereotypes from the other culture, therefore perpetuating the bias and the prejudices of the students.

On the other hand, presenting only aspects of the other culture which are picturesque, quaint, or exotic can lead to a patronizing acceptance of these others as a lesser breed. At the same time, an uncritical presentation of the other culture as all that is admirable and inspiring can also raise hostilities from those students who feel that their own culture is being denigrated.

Many of the problems mentioned can be overcome through the promotion of a multi-cultural program that positively encourages the open discussion of cultural differences in a two-way situation. Teachers bring materials, students bring materials; both the teachers and the students would raise questions, and members of the other culture are drawn into the discussion wherever feasible. Both the cultures of the individual students and the target culture are investigated, openly examined, and analyzed. The students will learn to identify and to discuss their own values while at the same time they consider those of others.

The experience, then, becomes one of self-discovery as well as the penetration of the values and viewpoints of others. Within the multi-cultural education program a new dimension is added to our students' thinking as they find that there are other ways of looking at things and other means of expressing, cherishing or rejecting them.

The Goals Of A Multi-cultural Education Program

In the promotion of a multi-cultural perspective in college education, people involved with education generally question the relationship between bilingual education and multi-cultural education. The common question is: Is multi-cultural education a sub-set of bilingual education or is it the other way around? Many, if not most, educators would consider bilingualism, although a good component of multi-culturalism, as merely a sub-set of multi-culturalism and nothing more. These educators may, however, even consider the notion that multi-cultural education should be a universal part of education in the world today.

No one can deny that it is quite possible for a person to become culturally sensitive, culturally efficient, and culturally sufficient without being bilingual or multi-lingual. Educators know that the converse, however, is not always true.

It is pertinent to ask: What are the major goals of implementing a multi-cultural perspective in college education? The answer lies in the fact that products of such an education should know how to understand and to study a culture. This is essential in view of the fact that many of our students in the local two-year colleges go overseas to study and interact in cultures other than their own. Thus, strategies of inquiry for disciplines taught in the local colleges, such as sociology, anthropology, economics, geography, and history, should be acquired by potential college graduates.

"Strategies of inquiry" are stressed rather than a "corpus of concepts." It would certainly be necessary for all prospective professionals to have learned concepts related to culture from the above-mentioned disciplines, but undeniably the strategies of inquiry are more important if a person is to be "a lifelong learner" and one who is able to move effectively amongst different cultural groups after life in college.

Another goal related to a multi-cultural perspective in college education is the need to be able to recognize and to nurture in our local college students an appreciation of certain elements of cultures which are not their own. Culture is basically transmitted through modeling behavior in various non-formal settings. Attending college is a formal setting. A college teacher transmits his culture to his students in both formal and informal ways within the formal setting of the college. When cultures, in addition to the teacher's, are to be nurtured, the teacher needs to be able to recognize these cultural elements and to deal with them in positive and productive approaches.

The products of a multi-cultural education program should normally be able to orchestrate learning settings and activities which foster multi-cultural inclusion rather than alienation. There are people who contend that some private colleges, particularly those in the West, are, in reality, institutions of alienation, given the very diversified students that make up the college population. These people may argue that such an alienation, especially in private colleges, could contribute to the decline of examination scores, increasing number of school drop-outs, rising juvenile crime rates and vandalism, drug abuse, tension between youth and adults, and rapid changes in sexual mores. It is unfair to place any or all the responsibilities squarely on any private institution, yet it is apparent that all private colleges do have a vital role to play in the reduction of alienation, through proper positive cultural inclusion in their education programs.

The promotion of a multi-cultural perspective appears to require the adoption of several necessary conditions in the college education program. There are at least four such conditions: (1) the composition of the student population, (2) the composition of the college faculty, (3) multi-cultural intrusion, and (4) a philosophical commitment.

The Composition Of The Student Population

It is generally an accepted fact that students who are familiar only with their own culture have limited opportunities to discern and to appreciate differences, especially when the institution they attend perpetuates a culture the same or very similar to their own.

The first condition for an effective multi-cultural education program, therefore, is a culturally heterogeneous student population in the college. This condition already exists in a great majority of the private colleges in Malaysia. The student population serves

as a primary resource in a learning environment, symbolically representative of the Malaysian society at large. A heterogeneous student make-up will help bring about the notion that multi-culturalism is not only a reality with which Malaysians must come to grips but it is also a rich source of individual and social enrichment and strength.

In any private college campus, a heterogeneous student body should not be perceived as incidental, temporary, or casual. Indeed, the cross-cultural contacts and interactions among culture groups within such a body should be seen as a source of both academic and social enrichment. Interacting actively together in a positive learning environment, variant culture groups get to learn to respect, to recognize, to appreciate, and to accommodate one another's unique culture.

The Composition Of The College Faculty

Undeniably, incorporating multi-cultural perspectives into classroom instruction can be a difficult task for many college teachers. Viewing issues and events from other cultural perspectives can be very challenging for these teachers, who may perceive themselves as asked by society to either represent all cultures all of the time or to be void of culture when teaching the students. Such a task is made more difficult when the teachers all make up a non-heterogeneous faculty.

It becomes obvious, then, that in addition to a heterogeneous student body, the second condition for an effective and meaningful multi-cultural college education program is a heterogeneous faculty. This faculty, as important as the student population, is one of the major resources of the learning environment. Through such a heterogeneous faculty, multi-cultural education can be viewed as a re-affirmation of democratic notions inherent in the college education philosophy. It can encompass certain fundamental values or beliefs in the college community such as:

- (a) contacts and interactions between divergent ways of life are both possible and desirable within the social and national context,
- (b) the differences between cultural groups in their lifestyles and values need not be threatened nor erased by cross-cultural interactions, and
- (c) different lifestyles are acceptable within a given national or social context.

Multi-cultural Intrusion

The third condition is the multi-cultural intrusion into the college instructional environment, and the various teaching methodologies of the college faculty. This intrusion symbolizes a dynamic introduction and an enhancement of multi-cultural objectives into the curriculum which draws from various cases and examples to illustrate the strengths and contributions of other cultures to the world of knowledge. This will definitely go a long way to foster an inter-cultural dimension in Malaysian education, emphasizing cultural interdependence amongst all people.

A Philosophical Commitment

It is generally expected that any effective multi-cultural education program necessitates that there should be a philosophical commitment on the part of the college faculty at all times. This is the fourth and last condition. All educators in the institution must appreciate and respect the varied ways and behaviors of others and discover within them valuable reflections of mankind's striving to create viable means of fulfillment together.

Conclusion

Promoting a multi-cultural education program in the local private colleges can and should reflect a microcosm of what the rest of the world can become. Ultimately, in working out various ways to achieve multi-culturalism within the colleges, the educators can draw from and simultaneously give to the world at large.

A multi-cultural education program can assist in the appreciation of the positive contribution to the Malaysian society from the different cultures which make it up. Hopefully, it will further enhance quality education in the institutions of study. Education, however, is certainly not an end in itself. It is a necessary aspect of our society and it will have to change as society changes.