



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN SOCIAL SCIENCE  
Volume 11 Issue 10 Version 1.0 December 2011  
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal  
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)  
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

# Multiethnicity In Southeast Asia And Education : Case Study Of Vision Schools In Malaysia

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**GJHSS-A Classification** : *FOR Code: 160506, 150307*



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# Multiethnicity In Southeast Asia And Education: Case Study Of Vision Schools In Malaysia

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has almost always been a key factor in the existence and development of societies throughout humankind's history and the same still holds true for contemporary society. As a matter of fact, this very important factor has a central role to play toward achieving a sustainably developed society.

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Before proceeding with further discussions however, the definition of a sustainable society and the relationship it has with education should first be clearly defined.

Based on conventional definitions, a sustainable society is usually defined as one that provides a high quality of life for all its members without harming the integrity and efficiency of natural systems and resources upon which all life depends. It is important to note that nature should act as the limit of human desires with humanity designing its dreams without overstepping the borders of nature. In a manner of speaking, Sustainability can therefore be defined as the ability to achieve a pleasing existence for everyone within the means of nature - both for populations today and in the future.

In more widely accepted parlance, the United Nations (1987) defines sustainable development as a form of development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

That being said, it is vital to bear in mind the important fact that a sustainable society is not solely concerned with the environment and nature. It also encompasses a wider range of issues and phenomena. A sustainable society must also be able to provide opportunities for each member of its community to reach his/her full potentials. Ideally, issues such as cultural diversity, adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter and a dignified life for all should also be included in the concept of a sustainable society.

Diversity is one of the most important issues that a sustainable society should recognize and promote, as both the strength and flexibility of human communities are born out of diverse strengths. The recognition and celebration of diversity however, cannot be achieved without an education system that is specifically designed to address this issue. An education system constructed for a sustainable society must strike a balance between the needs of people and those of the natural systems.

As was mentioned earlier, a suitable education system is the key toward achieving a sustainable society. This approach is best mirrored through the umbrella term of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which is defined by UNESCO (2005) as an effort "to help people to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of



themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions."

In order to achieve this suitable education system, a number of elements should be taken into consideration such as a society's geographical location, population texture, socio-economic background, etc. That being said, it is understood that designing and running a suitable system of education in societies with diverse ethnic backgrounds is quite different from that of a homogenous society. Nonetheless mastering such a concept is certainly very important in regions such as ASEAN which contains a high degree of cultural and ethnic diversity.

## II. MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

ESD in the ASEAN region will inevitably lead us to the issue of multiethnic societies and the challenges that education systems in these societies face to address the needs of different ethnic groups. According to Welsh (1993), "A multiethnic society is in contrast to mono-ethnic societies; integrate different ethnic groups irrespective of differences in culture, race, and history under a common social identity larger than one "nation" in the conventional sense."

The issue of ethnic diversity does indeed complicate things somewhat. This is especially true in areas such as governance, political systems, economic strategies and of course the education system. The backbone to dealing with these complexities is to determine how best to address the needs and wills of each ethnicity equally within the frame work of national identity and solidarity.

Malaysia is a fine example of a multiethnic country situated within the ASEAN region. Malaysia does in fact, represent the true meaning of what constitutes a diverse society in many ways - including ethnically, linguistically and religion-wise. Population wise, Malaysian society is made up of the Malays 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, Indigenous 11%, Indians 7.1% and others ethnicities 7.8% (2004 est.). Languages that are spoken by these ethnicities include Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Punjabi among the Indians and even Thai. Several indigenous languages also exist with some of the most widely spoken being Iban and Kadazan. This pattern of diversity lends itself to the nation's religions as well with Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Baha'ism and also Shamanism practiced all over Malaysia.

The information above indicates just how difficult it can be to keep such a diverse society in harmony while providing an education system that is both fair and equal based on mutual understanding and respect. In such a diverse society, the education system must be capable of adopting certain guidelines that address the cultural and ethnic needs of each group while simultaneously keeping the society within the frame of national community.

The Malaysian education system consists of three different kinds of schools. Most common are government-sponsored schools (national Schools). Next are private schools and thirdly, home-schooling. A point worth noting is that the Malaysian education system is extremely centralized especially with regard to primary and secondary schools.

It is the mandate of the Malaysian constitution that the Ministry of Education prepares the National Education Policy based on the National Ideology or as it called in Malay, the "Rukunegara." The principles of the National Ideology are, Belief in God, Loyalty to the King and the Country, Upholding the Constitution, Sovereignty of the Rule of Law and Good Behavior and Morality.

As Adam (1995) explains, the main aims of the Government's Educational Policy are to 1) Equip students with the skills needed in a holistic and integrated manner in order to produce individuals that 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 and 4) Instill desired moral values in students so they contribute effectively toward nation building.

Curriculum-wise, there are several different types of primary and secondary schools available in the Malaysian education system. The main difference between them is the language used. All these schools form their educational activities and lesson plans based on the national curriculum. In conducting the classes however, they utilize their respective vernaculars as the medium of instruction. Chinese and Tamil vernacular school students have to undergo a year in "Remove Class" prior to their promotion to Form 1 to enable them to effectively handle the national curriculum in Bahasa Malaysia. Based on the factors mentioned above, there are four types of governmental schools in Malaysia; 1) National Schools (Malay), 2) National Chinese Schools, 3) National Tamil Schools and 4) National Arabic Schools (These are few in number).

In January 2003, a brand of mixed mode instruction was introduced in schools which required Science and Mathematics to be taught in English from Standard 1 onward while other subjects continued being taught in Malay. The same applied to Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools which conduct classes in Mandarin and Tamil respectively.

Issues of ethnicity and language have always been a challenge in the face of the Malaysian education system since the founding of Malaysia in 1957. There have always been arguments on how best to make policies and run the country while enabling equal opportunities and rights for all members of this diverse society.

The idea of vernacular schools often comes under criticism by different sectors of society as a barrier

in the fostering of inter-ethnic relations. On the other hand, supporters of the system claim that this grants students from different ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to preserve their respective cultures within the frame of national unity.

### III. VISION SCHOOLS

In order to tackle such issues, the Malaysian government made the decision to introduce a new kind of primary school in 2004 which was called the Vision School (Sekolah Wawasan). According to the Malaysian Bar (2007), "Vision schools are primary schools with the concept of children learning together within an area without regard for race or religion." Under this concept, two or three primary schools from different vernaculars are placed within the same area. Each school will then have its own building connected to those of other schools via a link-way.

This system is still in its testing phase and there are just five of them throughout the country. As mentioned earlier, the three main types of schools (National, National Chinese and National Tamil) are placed at the same location under the name Vision School Complex. Each school is separate from the other and acts independently in all regards ranging from its administrative system to its curriculum. Thus, in effect, each school follows its respective national curriculum without interfering with those of the others.

The most important factor which differentiates this school from ordinary schools is the notion of enabling students from different ethnic backgrounds to interact with each other during break time and other joint co-curriculum activities. This plan is considered an innovative option to address the main concerns of preserving ethnic cultures and supporting inter-ethnic integration toward sustaining the nation's national unity. Some of this schooling system's main objectives as defined by the Malaysian Ministry of Education are fostering solidarity among pupils of different races and backgrounds, instilling the spirit of integration among pupils of different streams, producing a generation that is tolerant and understanding so as to realize a nation that is united and encouraging maximum interaction among pupils through the sharing of school facilities and implementation of other activities at school.

Certain questions and concerns do arise resulting from the implementation of Vision Schools. Can this pattern of schooling truly fulfill the principles of education in a diverse multiethnic society like Malaysia? What are the challenges, advantages and disadvantage of this plan? How successful has this plan been in achieving its goals and objectives? In order to answer these questions, it is first necessary to look at some of the fundamental characters and principles of multiethnic education systems and then proceed to evaluate the output of Vision Schools based on these findings.

At this point in education's progress, there still exist some arguments on how best to define a multiethnic education system. Some experts believe that

a multiethnic education system can be achieved by adding certain special courses to the existing curriculum in order to make it possible for each ethnic group to have a say in mainstream curriculum. On the other hand, there are some who believe that change should happen in the classrooms and that it is only in the school setting that students from different ethnic backgrounds can interact and integrate with one another more constructively.

It is clear to see that Malaysian Vision Schools follow the second school of thought in which the climate of classrooms and social interactions among students from different ethnic backgrounds are given priority as opposed to a change in curriculum. As mentioned earlier, Vision Schools do still adhere to the national curriculum which was designed for them based on their respective vernaculars with student interaction occurring outside of official curriculum and classroom settings.

It should be noted that although these schools are referred to as vernacular schools, they (National (Malay), Chinese and Tamil schools) are still not completely homogenous schools. There are a large number of students from different ethnic backgrounds in each school and referring to these schools as either Chinese or Tamil should not imply that there are no other ethnicities present in those schools. The terminologies were based on the ethnic majority of students attending these schools. This additional characteristic makes addressing the needs of each individual student in terms of his/her identity harder and more complicated.

### IV. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF MULTIETHNIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

There are certain academically-recognized principles in the preparation of curriculum for multiethnic education systems which should be addressed in multiethnic societies like Malaysia.

The first important principle is that ethnic and cultural diversity should be advocated in the entire school environment. The idea of celebrating, accepting, understanding and respecting different cultures and ethnicities should be well reflected not only in the subjects and the official curriculum of the school but the setting, atmosphere and climate of the school as well. It goes without saying that the unofficial curriculum of the school is as important as the official one when it comes to recognizing and equally addressing society's ethnic diversity.

To promote the understanding of ethnic diversity within the school environment, students should be able to have first-hand access to updated materials such as books, notes, audio-video resources, magazines, newspapers and the Internet which can provide accurate, reliable information for different ethnic groups on their society, beliefs, traditions, etc. This can be easily achieved through at-school libraries or media centers.



This issue was well understood by Vision Schools in Malaysia, with all five Vision Schools in the country equipped with libraries that provide relevant information to students in order to increase their level of understanding about the different ethnic groups that exist at their school and in society. These libraries contain a large range of materials such as literature, music, history, etc. from different ethnic groups.

The setting of classes, gathering halls, corridors, cafeterias and offices at schools should also reflect multiethnic and multicultural notions. Decorative spaces that are available at schools also provide an important avenue for students to deepen their comprehension of other cultures.

Although the administrative offices and classes of each Vision School are separated, all students still share many common areas such as the cafeteria, school yard and gathering halls. Bearing in mind the decorative spaces mentioned in the previous paragraph, all these common areas should be decorated with the cultural heritage and art of the different ethnic groups in the country. In a Bornean Vision School which is located in the eastern half of Malaysia, cultural signs of indigenous cultures were emphasized in compare alongside those of mainstream cultures.

Co-curricular activities occupy an important position in the manner through which they advocate and raise the awareness of students on the cultural diversity of Malaysia. For this purpose, participation of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds should always be promoted. Such activities can provide priceless opportunities not only for the development of the students' self-esteem, but for students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to learn to work and play together.

Because Vision Schools utilize the same curriculum as those used by national schools, co-curricular activities also exist as a part of their learning experience. Co-curricular activities are the most important ways to encourage students to mix together and work toward common goals. As a multicultural society, Malaysia celebrates many different cultural events from different ethnicities and cultures. These celebrations provide a unique firsthand opportunity for students to experience the cultural diversity of their society.

Vision Schools also communally celebrate certain national cultural festivals such as Hari Raya (Islamic festival marking the end of the fasting month), Diwali (Hindu festival), Chinese New Year and Malaysia's National Day by eliciting the participation of students from different backgrounds to fully comprehend national unity and promote understanding and respect for other cultures. The students participate in different activities like drawing and singing competitions, among others in order to celebrate these events together.

Activities such as mosque, temples and church visits are provided by school officials to familiarize

students with each other's cultural and traditional backgrounds.

The second important factor or principle in the multiethnic education system is the issue of school rules, regulations and policies. These rules and regulations should serve the purpose of promoting cultural understanding among different student ethnic groups.

Any school that attempts to maintain order and discipline recognizes the need for certain rules and regulations. The implementation of these rules can be challenging at some schools - especially those with diverse ethnic and religious students. This is a challenge most multiethnic schools face every day. This issue reveals the important roles that equality and fairness play in a multiethnic society and provides valuable lessons on how to ensure that the harmony and sustainability of an ethnically diverse school is maintained.

The issue of fairness in a multiethnic school is quite different from that of a school which is homogenous in nature. It is rather difficult to apply the same rule and logic to address every student's issue. Something that looks fair to one ethnic group may seem unjust to another. For this reason, the administration of a multiethnic school has to adopt a policy to attend to the needs of each ethnic group on a specific manner based on a healthy respect for their respective cultural identity and beliefs.

This concept can be translated into the school's everyday rules and regulations. School cafeterias at Vision Schools are one such example. As these schools have many Muslim students, the food sold in these cafeterias should be Halal (prepared in accordance with Islamic regulations) while at the same time respecting the Hindus, by eliminating beef from the menu.

On the other hand, discriminatory policies or regulations that are based on ethnic, religious or cultural stereotyping should be removed from schools and classrooms. Cases where the academic achievements of students were tied to stereotypical interpretations of their ethnicities have been recorded and this matter must be carefully monitored in multiethnic schools to prevent any kind of tension or discrimination.

The third important principle that must be addressed is the ethnic texture of the academic and non-academic staffs of the school. It is vital that a multiethnic school has teachers, administrators and other complementary staff from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It is also important to note that students at the primary school level tend to view their teachers and school staff as role models. At this stage, teachers and school officials can greatly influence the molding of a student's personality and character. Such a crucial period undoubtedly validates careful observation. A multiethnic texture of teachers and officials will help the student to experience firsthand the constructive interaction among different members of society from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

As Arora (2005) mentions in her book, "A mono-ethnic schooling system within a multiethnic society can seriously decrease the level of interracial understanding, integration and sympathy among students." In order to reduce such difficulties and problems at Vision Schools, attempts have been made to choose students and administrative staff from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in order to maintain stability and provide maximum interaction among different ethnicities at schools. At Vision Schools, teachers from different ethnicities are responsible for teaching different courses. This policy provides a trusting and positive environment for students to enjoy interethnic interactions. The role of teachers in navigating interethnic interactions via proper channels is central to this issue.

The forth imperative principle that must be addressed in a multiethnic education system is the idea of raising awareness among students on their respective ethnic identities against the framework of society's ethnic and cultural pluralism. Curricular and co-curricular activities at schools should be designed in such a way as to help students discover their respective ethnic identity and feel positive about it.

School activities should be planned to enable students from different ethnic backgrounds to learn more about his/her ethnic history. In other words, students should be celebrated and positively encouraged for who they are. Establishing a consciously positive ethnic identity can help students form solid personalities for themselves in preparation for future life. Students should also feel safe and proud to express their ethnic identity and history. They have to be assured that in a pluralistic society, everyone would still be treated equally regardless of his/her ethnicity.

At the same time, this multiethnic education system must be made aware that the student's sense of self identity has to be defined within the framework of a pluralist society. Students should be taught that pluralism is the opposite of polarization. Students should also understand that belonging to a unique identity or ethnic background should not cause any kind of superiority or inferiority complexes in their social lives. That being said, students should nonetheless be informed on the realities of life as well. They must understand that it is possible for conflicts in society to arise from ethnic issues. Many of these issues however, can be avoided by facilitating greater understanding and respect for other cultures and ethnicities. As of such, students should be made privy to this understanding in order to minimize the occurrence of ethnic friction. They must view the harmony that exists at their schools as a sample of their larger multiethnic societies.

In order to realize these concepts, Vision Schools teach the vernacular languages of students from different ethnic backgrounds as a tool to increase student awareness of their roots and ethnic backgrounds. Language can be used as a very powerful

means by which to facilitate student awareness on their respective cultural identities. Apart from this, there are many co-curricular activities provided by Vision Schools which enables each ethnicity to celebrate its identity through avenues such as art and cultural classes. At the same time, all students regardless of ethnic background are obliged to learn Bahasa Malaysia as the country's official and national language in order to enable communication with other ethnicities and to facilitate the notion of national unity. During curricular and co-curricular activities, students are also educated on their ethnic and national heroes to ensure balance between self and national identities. Attitudes and corresponding values of living in a multiethnic society must always be promoted by the curriculum and co-curricular activities at Vision Schools.

The fifth major element that has to be considered in a multiethnic education system is the promotion of personal cross-ethnic communication among students. This is one of the most vital elements in ensuring a sustainable multiethnic society for the future. Students from different ethnic backgrounds should be educated on how to communicate with each other without the influence of religious or ethnic prejudice. Personal interactions between students should also be constantly promoted by the education system.

Close interactions such as those mentioned above will enable greater understanding between students from different ethnic backgrounds while preventing any kind of cultural and ethnic stereotyping or misunderstandings in the future. Such cross-ethnic personal interaction should be endorsed from an early age at primary schools where the basis of social identity and the student's individual personality is still under construction. Students should be knowledgeable enough to understand that ethnicity is just one of the many aspects of human life and there is so much more that we have in common with each other as opposed to our differences. Promoting common aspects among human beings can play a big role in preventing many ethnic disputes and clashes in the future.

In working toward these goals, Vision Schools encourage students to mingle during class and particularly during break time. Students from different ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to play together, to eat together at school cafeterias, participate in group games and also be involved in the decision-making processes at school such as student committee elections. Such active participation will help students have a better understanding of each other's cultures, traditions, beliefs and ways of thinking.

The above principles are some of the key factors which must be considered in every multiethnic education system. With regard to Malaysia's Vision Schools (as has been reflected in this paper), there have been tremendous efforts carried out to ensure fair and efficient education patterns (from designing these

schools to running them) in order to address the needs of each student group as espoused in the main principles of a multiethnic education system.

## V. DEFICIENCIES

However, as was mentioned earlier, Vision Schools (established in 2004) are still relatively new to the Malaysian education system and therefore still have a long way to go before reaching their ideal goals. There are however, certain urgent deficiencies that must be addressed if sustainable multiethnic education systems at these schools are to be maintained.

The first important deficiency is the lack of cooperative teaching. According to Cook (2004), "Co-teaching is a service delivery model in which two (or more) educators or other certified staff, contract to share instructional responsibility, for a single group of students, primarily in a single classroom workspace, for specific content (objectives), with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability." This style of teaching will give students the opportunity to learn subjects from different points of view (in this case different ethnic points of view) and will enable them to better comprehend social and ethnic issues.

The second deficiency to be seriously considered is the lack in special training for Vision School teachers. Although all Vision School teachers are trained in Teacher Training Centers or universities, most of these trainings focus mostly on the academic aspects of their careers. The teachers of such schools should also be specially trained on certain vital issues such as intercultural communication skills, history of different ethnic groups in society, cultural sensitivities, etc. A teacher who is well-trained on these issues can end up being very helpful in maintaining harmony among the different ethnicities at schools. Such training can be easily obtained in short term courses, programs or workshops organized by the Ministry of Education with the help of different ethnic societies and/ or associations.

The third issue which should be addressed by Vision Schools is the social background of the teacher. It is extremely important to strike a balance between the social background of the students and teachers in order to facilitate understanding between the two groups. For instance, students from society's lower-income group tend to be more sensitive to ethnic values and attitudes than those from the upper classes. These students may find the regulations and value systems of their multiethnic school to be more difficult to adapt to. This is caused primarily because of their stronger sense of belonging to their respective ethnicity and ethnic values. In such a setting, teachers who are familiar with related ideas and thinking can be of great help in maintaining the school's harmony while mitigating conflicts.

## VI. CHALLENGES

Apart from the positive aspects and deficiencies of this endeavor, Vision Schools face also face certain challenges from the public sector and the community. An example of this being the case of the Tasik Permai Vision School Complex in Penang, Malaysia, whereby the Chinese school refused to join the Vision School plan due to the belief that participating in such a complex will result in the erosion of culture and identity among Chinese students. Their argument was that having different ethnicities in one school will damage the sense of ethnic patriotism and in the long run produce students that are apt to forget their roots and culture. This is the reason as to why the Tasik Permai Vision School Complex consists of just one National School (Malay) and one National Tamil (Indian) School.

In another incident, there were complaints from the parents of some of the Muslim students at Vision Schools who did not agree with a number of cross-cultural activities carried out at the schools. They argued that an intercultural activity such as visiting a Hindu or Chinese temple and introducing other religions and traditions to Muslim students is no different from proselytizing.

However, a study on the social background of these parents revealed that they tend to belong to rural parts of society and that this problem would be easier handled had the school involved the participation of teachers or staff from surrounding rural areas. On the other hand, the role of local communities and their constructive relationship with Vision Schools should not be underestimated. Local communities with different ethnic backgrounds have key roles to play in managing such conflicts between the public and Vision Schools.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The idea of Vision Schools was introduced to the Malaysian Education System in order to increase and promote a sense of understanding and respect among students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The long term goal of this endeavor is to educate and inculcate students with a deeper degree of respect toward one another and members of society who are ethnically and culturally distinct from them. Although Vision Schools follow the National Curriculum with regard to academic syllabus, what differentiates them from other schools is their multiethnic environment. This environment gives students the unique opportunity to foster a sense of solidarity with other ethnicities through special co-curricular activities. To be certain, there are always deficiencies and challenges ahead of any endeavor. It is also important to note however, that over time, most of them can be solved through careful planning and evaluation.

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