

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.