

Unity through Arts: Educational Program to Cultivate Harmony in Multi-cultural Society among Malaysian Children

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Abstract As a pluralistic society characterized by a multitude of diversity, shaped and consolidated during the colonial era, Malaysia exhibits a great deal of differentiation among its population. Living in a multi-cultural society and with the national agenda to achieve the developed nation status by year 2020, it is compelling for Malaysian to be united where Malaysian have to accept and respect other cultural values, able to see the good and strengths in diversity and knowing how to promote and bond commonalities and goodness of all cultures. Thus, promoting unity in multi-cultural society among Malaysian should start from school education since young.

Art through its own variety of approaches could show possibilities in addressing diversity in a community that consists of multiple ranges of racial and cultural backgrounds such as Malaysian community. Arts education is essential for each child since arts cover the entire learning domain – cognitive, psychomotor and affective. Utilizing the advantages of arts in a child's learning process and its possibilities to create harmony among communities from different races, a model for arts education called Unity through Arts was proposed to create unity among Malay, Chinese and Indian primary school children from different schooling systems – national and vernacular schools.

Keywords arts, education, unity, harmony, multi-racial, multi-cultural

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1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country which constitutes major races namely Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazan, Iban and others. The Malays are majority (around 60%), followed by Chinese (25%) and Indians (7%), while, others represent about 8% of total Malaysian population. The division range of population witness diversity in language, culture, and customs, and religious beliefs. Therefore, unity among Malaysian is pivotal to sustain the harmony among different races. Unity is also essential for Malaysia to achieve the status of a developed nation by year 2020. Strengthening unity and national integration are the main agendas of the Malaysian government since independence. This has been documented, emphasized and implemented in the Malaysian policies and decision making. The racial integration among Malaysian seems to be feeble compared to 20-30 years ago. The gap between races is widening and it may cause more division among Malaysian. Therefore, the iconic 1Malaysia is being introduced widely among Malaysian (1Malaysia, 2012).

As envisaged by the current Malaysian Prime Minister the concept of '1Malaysia' – One Malaysia- that instill and cultivate national integration, inter-racial harmony, the spirit of unity in which all elements are focusing on the same objective in uniting Malaysian from various races to embrace the spirit of oneness (1Malaysia,2012). The concept is an important agenda among Malaysian and this concept could bring Malaysian together much closer and unite to achieve the vision and mission of the government. This agenda could be achieved via education channel in which the concept of 1 Malaysia need to be instilled and cultivated among school children as they are the future backbone and upcoming generation of Malaysia.

Promoting unity among multicultural society such as Malaysia should start from an early age, and it must be cultivated since primary school among Malaysian children. However, the current Malaysian education system which has been inherited from the British system consists of two different schooling systems at primary level. As such, the integration between children from various races and cultural back-

grounds has not been developed as intended by the government.

Malaysian education system is divided into two different entities; national school system and vernacular school system. In national school, Malay language is the main language used for educating students while in vernacular school system, Mandarin – Chinese school- and Tamil – Tamil school- are the main language for education. The different education systems causing more division among Malaysian because 85-90% in national school are Malays while 99-100% in both Tamil and Chinese school are Indians and Chinese respectively. There is no common platform for children to mix around with their friends from other races and that hinders cultivation of unity among Malaysian children (MOE, 2013).

Unity should start from small but the scenario in the primary schools seems not reflecting the composition of Malaysian. The school children are divided into three different schooling systems and their parents tend to prefer sending them to school according to their mother tongue. The communication among children from different races is very minimal and the gap is getting wider. The polarization among different races is getting worse and it might be a threat to the national integration, security, and development. Although, some initiatives have been taken by Malaysian government through the introduction of Vision school system, but it is not successful as hoped. Some subjects have been taught in classroom that comprises the element of understanding different races, culture, and religion in Malaysia but it is merely a conceptual knowledge which has minimal impact on children.

Racial integration need to be inculcated and it should not be limited through classroom learning only, there should be a mechanism in the curriculum that enables school children from national and vernacular schools work and create tangible items and products together which allow them to mingle with children from other races and appreciate other custom, culture, and beliefs. With this motivation, we have proposed a model program for national and vernacular schools children that promote integration, toleration, and cooperation among different ethnic groups through the arts education platform.

This proposed program will be providing an effective platform for unity amongst

school children from different races and different schooling system. The program is called *UNITY through ARTS* have been developed and carried out among primary school children (11-12 years old) from selected national and vernacular schools.

2. NATIONAL UNITY and EDUCATION SYSTEM

A study conducted by University Malaya researchers and reported by Kaur in year 2007, revealed findings that only 52% of the teenagers in Malaysia said they had a friend of a different race. Socializing and mixing with other races were not something that concerned many of the respondents where about 13% felt that it was an issue, while the majority (63.9%) was more worried about contracting a disease (Kaur, 2007). Those findings can be considered as a serious problem that need to be solved before it could lead to other major racial problems in Malaysia. One of the major contributing factors is the degree of inter-racial interaction and communication among students in schools. .

The Malaysian education system that divides into national and vernacular school systems has further created gap and isolation among different races in Malaysia. It is believed that Malaysian parents prefer sending their children to school according to their mother tongue to safeguard and protect the sanctity of each ethnic group (Ruslan, 2009). Brown (2007, pg.8) cited that “Political theorists concerned with multicultural societies broadly concur that education – particularly the fields of citizenship and history – plays a vital role in promoting good interethnic relations, but quite what form this education should take is a matter of dispute”.

Looking back during the British colonization period before independence, the concept of divide and rule has been imposed in Malaysia according to the races. Before the independence, majority of Malays residing in rural area while the Indians in estates – rubber plantation – and the Chinese in urban area. The practice facilitates the British to implement the concept of divide and rule in which the schooling systems were also divided according to the races where they introduced vernacular

schooling system. After the independence, the schooling system which had been introduced by the British has been continued until today with little changes in the overall mechanism and curriculum of Malaysian schools. Thus, the process towards unity among multicultural society in Malaysia is facing a lot of obstacles due to different types of schools which segregating the Malays, Chinese and Indians students from interacting each other at a very young age. After being 'conditioned' at primary school from different education system setup, students move up to secondary school. As a result, they have many problems in interacting and mixing with students from different races. The problems are largely contributed to the different languages that have been used as a medium in education delivering system in vernacular primary schools – Chinese and Tamil. This creates a language proficiency gap among the students who were from vernacular schooling system, majority of them are having difficulties in conversing and mastering Malay language which has been used as the lingua-franca in secondary school system.

Ruslan (2009) said that "there are now three mainstreams in the Malaysian school system, which are National school, Chinese-type national school and Tamil-type national schools and it is very crucial to bring these three school systems students to find ways and opportunities to interact among themselves through school activities" (pg.2). Moreover, our educational system should be able to support the practice of intercultural processes to ensure that the aim of intercultural communication be achieved. Intercultural communication is also encouraged to be taught since elementary school because children are to be more adaptive to cultural differences and they would adjust their behaviors as they getting mature (Asante, 1979). Malaysian government is tackling the issues of ethnicity and unity among different races in Malaysia within the content of the educational curricula at the primary and secondary level. Malaysian government has recognized the importance of education as a tool for promoting national unity and builds the identity of Malaysian.

Education that put forward the efforts for unity among multi-racial society, promotes ideas of community, resist racial or nationalist propaganda, and build up students' own skills in resolving conflicts. In the context of a multi-cultural society,

conflict does happen. Therefore, education that emphasizes on efforts to strengthen students' skills in mediating, resolving, or transcending conflicts, and in making peace among their peers and in their communities should be implemented in order to preserve harmony (Minow, 2002).

In the context conflict, the incident of ethnic riot on 13th May 1969 opens up a new dimension in Malaysian political, social, and economical systems, especially in unification of different races in Malaysia. A national ideology called "Rukun Negara" also was introduced which constitutes as followings:

- i. Faith in God;
- ii. Loyalty to King and Country;
- iii. Respect for the Rule of Law;
- iv. Upholding the Constitution; and
- v. Morals and Good Behavior.

The national ideology became the compulsory element in primary and secondary school education where Civics course was introduced in 1970's (Brown, 2005) to teach the national agenda and instill the values of "Rukun Negara". Civics was replaced with Moral Education which also emphasizing on moral values and citizen education (Milner, 2002). Moral Education curriculum instills the role and responsibilities of the individual in a multi-ethnic society through pedagogy related to unity and multi-ethnic relationship. Minow (2002) has cited that "Moral education—and civic and multicultural education—use varied curricula but share the assumption that direct instruction in tolerance and other values can and should proceed through the content of the curriculum" (pg.18). On the other hand, Ministry of Education, Malaysia introduced other subjects such as Local Studies – primary school and History – secondary level – in imparting knowledge to students on spirit of Malaysian and patriotism.

It is very clear that in Malaysian school curricula especially key core subjects such as Moral education, History, and Local Studies combine a positive social agenda of inculcating cultural and religious pluralism and tolerance among Malaysian. At the same time, arts education also could contribute in national social agenda by em-

bedding the key elements of national unity concepts in arts pedagogy.

UNESCO (2006) guideline emphasized that “educational content should also provide the artistic means to practice communication and to interact within various cultural, social and historical contexts. The multicultural education should adopt a collaborative learning process, including the sharing of ideas and open dialogue discussions. Every child’s thoughts and opinion must be respected and any misconception about peace must be clarified through their own exploration and research from valid materials and resources. With this, each child will develop the satisfaction and respect for cultures that may seem different from them” where according to (Guetzkow, 2002), the arts provide a catalyst for the creation of social capital and the attainment of important community goals.

At the same time, a form of curriculum that is flexible and allows transformative learning from the children’s aspect must be introduced. Therefore, there must be a common platform that brings all children together under one roof and involve in activities that encourage intercultural communication that builds unity, harmony, and peace.

3. ARTS EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR UNITY

As the UNESCO guideline emphasized on the creative expression of students’ in unity development among multi-cultural society, arts education would be able to provide an efficient platform for the students to convey their point of views and standpoints in the context of national unity through arts education. As the other core subjects like Moral education, Local Studies, and History that involved in national unity development, arts education also can be a major part of it.

The learning domain that involves in teaching process for Moral education, Local Studies, and History is largely dominated by cognitive element since the students’ learning process involve more on acquiring knowledge via reading. On the other hand, arts education involves all three learning domains which are cognitive,

affective, and psychomotor. These three learning domains are important to build a student capability in all aspects of a subject matter (Hanna, 2007). Thus, the cultivation on the concept of unity in a school subject is believed to be more efficient if it involves all three learning domains that provides by arts education. Through involvement in arts education programs, students also have opportunities to put across their own point of view without any restrictions.

Arts are essential key components of a comprehensive curriculum as well as fundamental instruments for interpersonal, social, and mental development. Allsup (1997) opined that “fundamental purpose of performing art forms, engaging with them, and trying to create them is to provoke some kind of personal transformation” (pg.81).

Recent research has highlighted that the nature of arts could positively influence students. Deasy (2002) in *Critical Links*, claimed from his research in arts that students’ cognitive capabilities, including higher forms of thinking, are enhanced through participation in arts education programs. Moreover, Holloway and Krensky (2001) opined that a large body of evidence suggesting that students’ involvement in the arts is positively correlated with higher academic achievement in other subjects. In Howard Gardner’s (1983) findings, *Frames of Mind*, provides a detailed outline of the multiple intelligences theory, which supports the belief that artistic intelligences are critical components of students’ development.

In addition to establishment of the linkage between academic achievement or cognitive growth and the arts, relevant research has explored the power of arts education to offer students with spaces for creativity, innovation, and socialization. Specifically referring to the visual art, Freedman (2003) cited the following “At its root, the purposes of art education is not to merely educate people about the technical and formal qualities of artifacts, but to help to extend the meaning of those qualities and artifacts to show their importance in human existence. It is this relevance that has made art worthy of a place in formal education” (pg.80).

Indeed, the arts are naturally expressive and, therefore, provide students with opportunities to explore and form new ideas, identities, and ways of discover knowl-

edge.

The arts also enable students to perform positive forms of expression through relations to others' experiences. In order for students to deeply grasp intense concepts such as unity, they should understand the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of an environment in which unity has been practiced. Holloway and Krensky (2001) opined that arts education can offer "the opportunity to cross boundaries between one's own experiences and those of others as expressed and shared through their works of art. This boundary crossing can lead to empathy and ultimately to develop an ethic of care" (pg.361). The arts can provide a communicative tool for students to use as they learn about and understand the experiences of others. At this point, students can also develop social skills to be used in their local context, including developing empathy and perspective taking in which these skills are vital for peace-building, conflict resolution, and cultivating students' consciousness in a society (Carlsson-Paige & Lantieri, 2005)

According to Roper & Davis (2000), "In arts education, as in psychology and much of the social sciences, most recent approaches polarize around an axis that has mind as an internal computational type of device at one end, and culture as an external linguistic and symbolic, social medium at the other end. Both assert the importance of mind and culture but choose to accord one or the other primacy; either a certain mental structure and process gives rise to human knowledge and ability, and ultimately to culture, or culture, language and technology give rise to human endeavor and interaction, and ultimately to the shape of the human mind" (pg.218-219).

Thus, arts could be an important tool for social integration where children who are exposed to arts will do better in school, develop greater social and emotional skills. Arts education and activities brings positive outcomes in terms of socio-cultural development where through the exposure to different culture via arts, it breaks the stereotypes and developing teamwork skills, tolerance and appreciation of diversity among the children from different races (Edwards, 1994).

Samovar et al. (1998) recognized the importance of intercultural knowledge in

the educational environment where they emphasized that efforts should be taken to appreciate diversity, but at the same time, finding ways to get groups of differing backgrounds to find a common ground. The integration of multicultural education in arts, enable the children to embrace cultural pluralism. Multicultural education program is able to strength the society which composed of people from different cultures and the value of individual cultures.

Thomas (2012) found that arts education is uniquely positioned for teaching peace among school children in the United States where the author used music to teach anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Arts can promote and expose the children to different culture and believes, and empower the children to accept multicultural environment that lead for harmony and unity (Nyaberi, 2009). Therefore, through the arts activities, it can develop and enhance unity among children from different races where it will be a cornerstone for greater nation where children are the future for a country.

4. UNITY THROUGH ARTS

The main objectives of this model program are as followings:

- a) To develop a model program using arts as a platform for racial integration among school children from different races.
- b) To create unity among school children from different schooling systems in Malaysia.

To cultivate harmony in society through experience the culture and beliefs of other races through arts.

At the same time, the program will be including different of arts such as visual arts, performing arts and music in which all the activities will be focusing on cultivating the spirit of Malaysian among the participants. Concept of unity, integration, and harmony are the main core of this model program where the activities will be conducted in line with those concepts. The children will be able to express

themselves and who they are as Malaysian through arts.

The topics for the activities that will be carried out are as followings; where all the topics will be embedded through the arts activities.

Who am I as Malaysian?

Who are they – others – as Malaysian?

What is Malaysia?

Empowerment of Malaysian via unity.

The program starts with a unit called “Who am I as Malaysian?” which emphasizes on the aspect “Me” in the context as a Malaysian. It brings out the perspective of an individual on i) who he/she is as a citizen in Malaysia, ii) how he/she perceive his/her surrounding as Malaysian?, and iii) what his/her role as Malaysian?. In this module, it includes some activities that focused on participants’ self-knowledge, and expression. And in turn, focuses on strengthening the self-esteem and a positive outlook as a Malaysian. The children have to draw on a piece of paper about their perspective(s) as a Malaysian. They were given an opportunity to express through visual expression.

Second topic of the program, called “Who are they – others- as Malaysian?” highlights on the element of “You” where it focuses on other individuals who are Malaysians. The unit emphasizes on the perception of a student on i) who are Malaysians? – peers and society at large, ii) what is the role of others in Malaysia? and iii) how is the relationship between you and others in the Malaysian society?. In this part, it involves the elements of appreciating different people’s perspectives, cultural values, and religion beliefs. The unit also cultivates the spirit of harmony and unity among the children who are living in multi-racial and multi-cultural society. In this activity, the children will create a group consists of different races will be given a task to sketch images related to their group members’ cultural activities such as festive season, food and etc. The images will be exchanged where the children belongs to the particular race will comment on their peers’ sketches related to their race cultural activities. The exchange of views enable the other students from different races understand other races cultural values.

The third unit focuses on “What is 1Malaysia”, it addresses the concept of 1Malaysia which become the national mission among the students. In this topic, it concentrates on the i) important aspects of 1Malaysia, ii) what is our – Malaysian- role towards 1Malaysia? and iii) how we can build the society with the spirit of 1Malaysia?. In this particular module, the aim is to recognize the participants’ perception about 1Malaysia and also their understanding on the objectives of 1Malaysia. This unit instills the spirit of 1Malaysia among the children through exercises related to 1Malaysia and patriotism. The activities related to this topic will be more on performing arts where the songs related to 1Malaysia and Malaysian patriotism will be performed by the students in a group. The performance in group will enhance the bonding among the members from different races. At the same time, while singing, they are able to value the message on the concept of 1Malaysia that embedded in the songs more effectively.

The final topic engages students in practicing “Unity as a Malaysian” where the topic addresses the concept of unity, harmony and sharing common values as Malaysian. This unit also emphasizes on how to manage conflicts in intergroup and societal contexts, understand others’ feelings and believing systems, importance of unity for peace and how an individual can play a role in strengthening the relationship among Malaysian. Activities such as group performance – music and drama – which includes students from different races have been carried out where through these activities, the children will be given a platform to work with other students who are from various backgrounds and cultural values where they can find ways to resolve conflicts in achieving the objectives of the activity. From this kind of activity, the students would be able to uplift the spirit of teamwork and ultimately, cultivate the concept of unity as a Malaysian.

5. ASSESSMENT

In order to test the effectiveness of the proposed program, a small scale kick start

project has been implemented among primary school children in Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

The program “Unity through Arts” is a result of the collaboration between Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia and Multimedia University, Malaysia under the 2013 UNESCO programme grant funding. We offered a three-day program to 30 participants from national and vernacular schools in Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia. The participants were from the ages of 11-12, who are from different races – Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Via this program, we seek to heighten the participants’ understanding as a Malaysian, instilled the spirit of 1Malaysia, and cultivate the concept of unity. The participants went through activities related to the topics which have been drafted out as in section 4; where all the exercises were based on arts – visual arts, music, and performance.

The participants were divided into five groups – six student in each group- where each group has three male and three female participants who are from different races. Each group will build their identity based on the concept of Unity and 1Malaysia. Each group was given arts exercises related to the topics of this program. The students need to express their view of each topic through their artwork and presen-



Figure 1. An Indian girl from Tamil school drawing objects related to Malaysia and Malaysian unity on the face of a Chinese girl from Chinese school.



Figure 2. The students from different groups participating in a musical performance.



Figure 3. Malay, Chinese, and Indian children are working together in an activity.

tation in a group.

The activities and students' involvement in this program are as shown following figures:

Upon completion, all the participants were interviewed, which consisted of one main question. The question investigated their perception on the topics carried out and their feeling about the program.

6. RESULT and DISCUSSION

Some backgrounds about the participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Background of participants

Gender	
Female	50%
Male	50%
Race	
Malay	33.33%
Chinese	33.33%
Indian	33.33%
Type of school	
National	33.33%
Chinese	33.33%
Tamil	33.33%

The following are some important data extracted from the participants through the interview.

- i. It is a good program and I really enjoyed it.
- ii. I am able to respect others' feelings and work in a group which consists of different races.
- iii. I am happy to be in Malaysia and I will try to be better Malaysian.
- iv. I started to appreciate others' from different races with different cultural values and languages.
- v. Art is the best tool for national unity since I was able value the concept of 1Malaysia through arts.

- vi. Colors have made me appreciate the diversity exists in Malaysia.
- vii. I can express myself who am I as Malaysian and who we are as Malaysian through arts.
- viii. Through arts activities, I learn better about the concept of unity and harmony in Malaysia.

Different ideas from peers from different races add up uniqueness in our group work, it makes our art work more attractive.

The program has given me an opportunity to make friends from different schools and races and the group activities have strengthened our relationships as Malaysian.

While carrying out the programme, some children have communication problems with peers from different schools and races. They were not able to mix up well with others due to language constraint but after a few activities, they were able to communicate well and work together with other children. Overall, all of the participants opined that they felt the topics were beneficial to them and this program which based on arts was enjoying and they were able to understand the concept of 1Malaysia and unity as Malaysian more effectively. From the interview, we have found that arts education can become a pivotal tool for national unity where the participants started to look at themselves and other Malaysian from 1Malaysia scope and the unity can be developed through the activities that have been carried out by the participants. At the same time, some students have expressed their appreciation towards the diversity that existed in Malaysia in which this can be seen as an important aspect in harmonization of multi-races and multi-cultural society.

7. CONCLUSION

This Unity through Arts program demonstrates how arts could be used to teach students about national unity. Typically, due to the creativity that personified by educators for arts education, it is likely that a wide range of curricula in all arts disciplines could be utilized to achieve the national unity education among children

in schools. The potential of arts education and its related activities positively affect students' experiences and teach them about national unity issues is huge. At the same time, an effort must be put forward so that the potential of arts education could be realized. Arts educators should expose themselves with the concept of multi-cultural, multi-races and also the principles of national unity.

In the context of national unity through education, students must be offered a space to practice their expression on unity and collaboration with other peers from different races and cultural backgrounds. A valuable learning opportunity can be provided to students, if we encourage the students to fully engage in participatory and expressive activities.

Through this program, the spirit of Malaysian as one community which built through different races has been realized. Arts can unite people from different backgrounds and arts education which covers the entire learning domain could give better understanding and impact on children about unity. Through this program, a framework will be outlined in order to extend this project all over Malaysia where the topics and activities in the program will be recommended to be embedded in the current arts education syllabus and pedagogy.

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예술을 통한 통합: 다문화사회의 조화를 위한 말레이시아의 아동 교육 프로그램

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요약 식민지 기간 동안의 경험에 의해 다양성과 다원주의를 사회적 특징으로 하는 말레이시아는 인구를 구성하고 인종이 매우 다양한 국가이다. 다문화사회이면서 동시에 2020년까지 발전국가로 발돋움하겠다는 국가적 아젠다를 가지고 말레이시아 국민들은 통합을 통해 이 목표를 달성해야 한다는 의지를 가지고 있다. 이러한 통합을 위해 말레이시아 국민들은 다른 문화적 가치를 받아들이고 존중해야 하며, 다양성 속에서 장점과 강점을 찾고, 여러 문화들의 공통성과 장점들을 장려하고 이들을 결합해낼 수 있어야 한다. 이러한 사회적 목표는 어린 시절 교육 과정에서부터 시작해야 할 것이다.

다양한 접근법을 통한 예술교육은 말레이시아와 같이 다양한 인종적, 문화적 배경을 가진 공동체에서 이 다양성을 포괄할 수 있는 가능성을 보여준다. 예술교육은 인지, 정신건강, 정서 등 모든 학습 영역을 포괄하는 교육분야라는 점에서 어린이들에게는 필수적인 교육이다. 이 논문은 전혀 상이한 교육 시스템을 경험한 말레이, 중국, 인도 출신의 초등학교 어린이들의 통합을 위해 예술 학습과정의 이점을 활성화하여 다양한 인종공동체 간의 조화를 가능하게 할 '예술을 통한 통합'이라는 예술 교육 모델을 제안한다.

주요어 예술교육, 통합, 조화, 다인종, 다문화

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