

MUSIC TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING MULTICULTURAL MUSIC IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the music teachers associated to the teaching of multicultural music education in Malaysian primary schools. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings that were examined in this paper address the following research questions: 1) What are the perceptions of music teachers regarding multicultural music education provided by their teacher training programs? 2) What aspects of teaching multicultural music education do music teachers perceive as most challenging? 3) What teaching approaches and activities are the most appropriate for multicultural music in the primary music classes? The findings revealed that music teachers reported that they did not have adequate multicultural training during their college courses. Besides, there is limited implementation of multicultural music education in music classrooms due to that many music teachers do not possess appropriate multicultural music knowledge and resources to teach multicultural music. Music teachers also reported that the activities and approaches used in class must involve the students actively, rather than passively receptive and also need to allow them to obtain first-hand experience of playing the traditional musical instruments. Therefore, music teacher training programmes are needed in order to address both the theoretical and practical aspects of multicultural music education throughout the curriculum in a comprehensive and long-term manner. Implications for multicultural music teaching and research were discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Music teachers, Multicultural music, Primary schools, Malaysia

Introduction

As a multiethnic and multicultural nation, Malaysia has shown its uniqueness and treasure among the countries in Southeast Asia. Three main ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian, have been sharing languages, lifestyles, and cultures with one another. Therefore, providing better harmony and understanding towards multiple cultures in educational curriculums has become one of the most important missions for teachers. Since music education is now compulsory in Malaysia primary school curriculum, this research focuses on music teachers' perceptions of teaching multicultural music in order to help and prepare primary school students to be responsive to sociocultural consciousness.

Context

Malaysia is a nation that locates in Southeast Asia, and is divided into East Malaysia (partial Borneo Island) and Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia). The Portuguese and Dutch ruled

the nation respectively in the 17th and the 18th Century, while the British took it over gradually. In 1826, British began the settlement in Melaka, and extended its colony including Penang and Singapore. Later on the Japanese occupied in 1942. Modern Malaysia started with the establishment of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, announcing its independence from Britain with the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The approximate number of Malaysia's population is 28.3 million. Of which the ethnic composition is 67.4% Bumiputera, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, and 0.7% Others of the population¹. The various ethnic groups have created the uniqueness of multiple cultures in Malaysia that its national education policy is to provide the awareness of loyalty, value, and aspiration for shaping national unity and identity.²

Primary Music Education in Malaysia

Malaysia primary music education was firstly under the management of the Ministry of Education as a subject in 1983. Students learnt on singing and playing instruments, such as the recorder and some percussions. Some schools provided marching band or choir ensembles as co-curriculum³. In the current music curriculum, students begin at the age of seven, and it takes six years to finish the study. Level one contains Year 1-3, followed by Level two that contains Year 4-6. Music education is one of the compulsory subjects in both levels⁴. For Year 1-3 students, singing activity is mainly focused. For Year 4-6 students, simple music notation is taught for the purpose of learning instruments.

Method

Participants

Nine music teachers, identified as Teacher A to I in this research, who are currently engaged in teaching music course from four government primary schools were interviewed. All music teachers interviewed are Malaysian. Five are Chinese, three are Malays, and one is Indian. They have been teaching in the Malaysian government primary schools for 3 to 8 years.

Data collection and Analysis

For the purpose of accumulating data, the researchers have elected to use semi-structured interviews as the approach for this research in order to allow in-depth interviews on the participants' views. According to Smith, this form of semi-structured conversation is the most effective way of gaining understanding and perceptions of the participants⁵. Interviews of 15 to 30 minutes were conducted at the workplace of the participants in this research.

¹ "Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal," Last modified 2011, accessed : June 28, 2016, https://www.statistics.gov.my/index.php?r=column/ctheme&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTk1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09

² Najeemah Mohd Yusof, "Multicultural Education: Managing Diversity in Malaysian Schools," *Malaysian Education Deans' Council Journal* 2(2008), 65.

³ Mohd Hassan Abdullah, "Music Education in Malaysian Public School: Implementation, Issues and Challenges," *Journal Pendidikan Bitara UPSI* 1(2007): 37.

⁴ "Primary Education," *Official Website of Ministry of Education Malaysia*, accessed June 28, 2016, <http://www.moe.gov.my/en/pelajaran-rendah>

⁵ Jonathan A Smith, "Semi Structured Interviewing & Qualitative Analysis," in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, ed. Jonathan A. Smith, Rom Harré, and Luk Van Langenhove (London: Sage Publication, 2005), 9.

Using the Malaysian primary school music teachers as cases, this paper investigates the following: 1) What are the perceptions of music teachers regarding multicultural music education provided by their teacher training programs? 2) What aspects of teaching multicultural music education do music teachers perceive as most challenging? 3) What teaching approaches and activities are the most appropriate for multicultural music in the primary music classes?

The guidelines of the interview were as follows:

1. The respondent's educational background and teaching experience.
2. The respondent's perceptions towards multicultural music education.
3. Related training or courses of multicultural music education that the respondent attended before teaching.
4. The challenging problem(s) that the respondent ever met on teaching multicultural music.
5. The respondent's solution towards the problem(s).
6. Students' interaction with the respondent.
7. Any creative methods developed by the respondent.
8. The respondent's advice and suggestions towards multicultural music teaching.

Results and Discussion

Below are the set out with illustrative quotes from the interviews.

1) What are the perceptions of music teachers regarding multicultural music education provided by their teacher training programs?

Teacher D and I pointed out that it is important to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive in the music classroom by offering a range of music that associates with the local languages and cultures in the teacher education courses in Malaysia.

Teacher E, G and I firmly believed that by sharing the diversity of music language and culture, it builds an awareness of own identity and own superiority in where one comes from and also what one can offer.

Teachers A to G remarked that they had insufficient training in multicultural music education in their teacher training programs. At the same time, moreover, teacher C and F told the researchers that they overlooked the importance of multicultural music education during the training session.

Teacher B and H further stated “We were mainly western taught.” Some instructors were not aware of the fact that Malaysia is a multicultural country, so they delivered the knowledge of western music education without further consideration and adjustment on the teaching methods.

2) What aspects of teaching multicultural music education do music teachers perceive as most challenging?

Teacher B and E reported that most of the challenges related to the management of the learning environment, in particular getting the traditional musical instruments. Teacher B

found that there were insufficient amount of traditional musical instruments in the music classroom.

Teacher A, C, D and E pointed out that the most challenging part is offering unfamiliar activities or repertoires to the students in the music classroom. When unfamiliar music is introduced in the music class for the first time, the feedback was not always positive.

Teacher F, H, and I addressed that preparing multicultural music teaching materials is the most challenging. Without full passions and respects on learning and understanding multiple cultures, the teachers are not capable to inspire students and catch their attentions.

Teacher G and I particularly emphasized that the family influences students' view. "When the student comes from an open-minded family, he or she is fond of discovering the cultural difference among the peers.

3) What teaching approaches and activities are the most appropriate for multicultural music in the primary music classes?

All music teachers remarked that singing activity is a natural way for students to approach multicultural music. By learning Malay songs, Chinese songs and Indian songs in music class, students show interests and respect of different cultures.

Teacher A, C and F believed that students obtain first-hand experience of playing the traditional musical instruments are far better than studying it from a book.

Teacher B, F, G, and I reported that "rhythm" is the key to access on teaching students multicultural music. They introduce repertoires that have characteristic rhythms, and students show interests and are eager to learn while hearing the pieces.

Teacher D and H brought up the idea of music showcase. By letting students prepare for multicultural music performances, students reveal the showmanship, and attempt to learn and improve in order to present good performances.

Teacher E and H mentioned about the student presentation. By the process of collecting information for the presentation, students have the opportunity to gain the knowledge of multicultural music.

Conclusion

The findings from this research have implications for the multicultural music teaching in Malaysia. The difficulties experienced by music teachers for teaching multicultural music need to be addressed. To assist and enhance the multicultural elements in teacher training programs need to be raised. Music teachers felt that they need for opportunities for continuing professional multicultural music training in order for them to teach efficiently in the music class. Therefore, by providing rich multicultural music programs within our music teacher education courses and primary schools in Malaysia, we prepare our music teachers and students to live, work and connect with the diverse society in which they have a greater appreciation and respect to others.

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