Education policies and practices to address cultural diversity in Malaysia: Issues and challenges

Suseela Malakolunthu · Nagappan C. Rengasamy

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Abstract The 1969 racial riot in Kuala Lumpur served as a historical landmark in the development of Malaysian education, as it raised concerns about the state of national unity in the country. Subsequently, education was coupled with the socioeconomic restructuring of Malaysian society in line with the New Economic Policy (NEP) that commenced in 1970. However, the changes delivered under the NEP also deepened the natural divides in a multiracial society. Conditions became more challenging in the face of globalization and the need for continued economic development. In the past decade, specific policies have been put forth to foster racial unity at the school level, including the Vision School, the Student Integration Plan for Unity, and Civic and Citizenship Education. But it is becoming obvious that they will produce positive results only if a concerted effort is made to incorporate inclusivity and multiculturalism into the national education agenda.

Keywords Education policy · Cultural diversity · National unity · Inclusion · Malaysia

Cultural diversity in Malaysian schools and, to some extent in its higher education institutions, must be viewed from both macro- and micro-level perspectives because of the nation’s demographics: the population is racially and ethnically mixed, and the socioeconomic spread is wide, between rich and poor, and between urbanites and rural people. The macro perspective applies to the broader national-level initiatives and the micro perspective to institutional-level interventions and activities.

The racial mix of the population is the legacy of British rule over Malaya, which lasted nearly two centuries until Peninsular Malaya declared independence in 1957. At the time Malays constituted 50 % of the population, along with 38 % Chinese and 11 % Indians.