ONENESS THROUGH EDUCATION DIALOGUE

Is Our Education System Doing Enough To Unite Our Multicultural Society?

13th November 2014, Putra World Trade Centre Kuala Lumpur

CHAU MENG HUAT
Event Overview

Education is usually viewed as the core problem solver for mostly every issue. It takes education to develop the society, embed the culture of abstaining from wrongdoings, instilling the spirit of patriotism, environmentalism, health consciousness and many more. Similarly, it is not a new revelation that it takes education to drive national integration.

Racial unity is a value everyone believes that has to be embedded at a very tender age. Various government initiatives to foster national integration and social cohesion in the society are infinitely emphasized from elementary level and all the way to higher learning institutions such as the famous ‘1 Malaysia’. Even so, Malaysia has been rocked several times with ethnic and religious issues which prompt us to re-think the actual strength of our national unity. What went wrong? How can we salvage it? And more importantly, is our education system doing enough to unite our multicultural society?

The Oneness Through Education Dialogue aims to harness the power of education in becoming a catalyst of national integration.

Objectives:

- Reviewing of policies and the current education system
- Eradicating inter-racial and intra-racial polarisation among students
- Enhancing the spirit of tolerance in the creation of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’
- Gaining insights on the new mechanisms to encourage national integration
- Highlighting the role of leaders and educators in building bridges

Attended By:

Presidents, Vice Chancellors, Deans, CEOs, Directors, Principals of public and private education institutions, education policy makers and government agencies

Distinguished Chairperson

Wan Saiful Wan Jan
Chief Executive
Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS)

Distinguished Speakers

Prof. Dato’ Dr. Zakaria Kasa
Vice Chancellor
Sultan Idris University of Education (UPSI)

Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim
Department of History
University of Malaya

Professor Dato’ Dr. Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid
Deputy Vice-Chancellor
INTI International University

Dr. Norlidah Alias
Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education
University of Malaya

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung
Vice President (Quality Assurance)
HELP University

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Syed Farid Alatas
Associate Professor of Sociology
National University of Singapore

Ho Khek Hua
Director, Institute for Research & Training of National Integration (IKLIN)
Department of National Unity and National Integration
The Dialogue was organized with the following statement of overview:

Education is usually viewed as the core problem solver for mostly every issue. It takes education to develop the society, embed the culture of abstaining from wrongdoings, instilling the spirit of patriotism, environmentalism, health consciousness and many more. Similarly, it is not a new revelation that it takes education to drive national integration.

Racial unity is a value everyone believes that has to be embedded at a very tender age. Various government initiatives to foster national integration and social cohesion in the society are infinitely emphasized from elementary level and all the way to higher learning institutions such as the famous ‘1 Malaysia’. Even so, Malaysia has been rocked several times with ethnic and religious issues which prompt us to re-think the actual strength of our national unity. What went wrong? How can we salvage it? And more importantly, is our education system doing enough to unite our multicultural society?

The main question which had been explicitly formulated and was to be addressed during the Dialogue is this: Is our education system doing enough to unite our multicultural society? The extent to which this question would be adequately tackled was a challenge for both the speakers and the Dialogue organizer, and the present review attempts to summarize the discussion as presented during the event and evaluates the Dialogue as a whole in relation to the question.

This review begins with an overview of the Dialogue, outlining the agenda of the one-day event. This is followed by a summary of key concerns addressed and raised by each invited speaker. A discussion is then presented, albeit briefly, for reasons of space, which situates the Dialogue within the broader, global context of issues and debates concerning the links between education and respect for diversity.
Overview

Targeting presidents, vice chancellors, deans, CEOs, directors, principals of public and private education institutions, education policymakers and government agencies as the audience, the Oneness through Education Dialogue began in the morning of 13 November 2014 and ended by the evening of the same day. A list of running themes highlighted in the event is as follows:

- Reviewing policies and the current education system;
- Eradicating inter-racial and intra-racial polarisation among students;
- Enhancing the spirit of tolerance in the creation of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’;
- Gaining insights on the new mechanisms to encourage national integration; and
- Highlighting the role of leaders and educators in building bridges.

The Dialogue began with opening remarks by Mr Wan Saiful Wan Jan, the Chairperson of the Dialogue, who is also the Chief Executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS). This was followed by a research paper presentation by the first invited speaker, Dr Norlidah Alias from the University of Malaya, after which two sessions of the Dialogue with their respective panel members were held, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

Dialogue One, entitled ‘Did our education system build bridges or walls?’, was planned with the following in mind:
- Review of education policies on national integration
- Should our curriculum be revamped to nurture tolerance rather than acceptance?
- Do co-curricular activities only instill unity on the surface?
- Emphasizing on the role of educators
- What more can be done?

The panel members for this session were Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim (University of Malaya), Professor Dato’ Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid (INTI International University) and Professor Dato’ Dr Zakaria Kasa (Sultan Idris University of Education).

The second session of the Dialogue, held in the afternoon, was entitled ‘How to break cultural clustering from pre-school till higher learning?’. The concerns addressed were as follows:

- Where do communalism and ethnocentrism start?
- Ensuring the continuity of national integration from one level to another;
- Equipping graduates with cross-cultural skills; and
- How leaders of institutions can make a difference?

The panel members were Associate Professor Dr Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung (HELP University), Associate Professor Dr Syed Farid Alatas (National University of Singapore) and Mr Ho Khek Hua (Department of National Unity and National Integration).

This was followed by a Question-and-Answer (Q & A) session before the Dialogue ended with some closing remarks by Ms Julie George on behalf of the Dialogue organizing committee.
Research paper presentation In her presentation entitled ‘National Integration in Multicultural School Setting in Malaysia’, Dr Norlidah Alias presented the findings of a study conducted with two other researchers which aims to develop an understanding of social interactions amongst students of various ethnic groups in secondary schools in Malaysia. In the study, a survey was conducted on a random sample of 1,720 students (Secondary Four and Five) of mixed ethnic groups in 34 secondary schools in five selected states in Malaysia.

The survey consists of 36 items measuring three constructs reflecting three strategic integration models documented in the literature: assimilation, multiple identity and multiculturalism.

The cultural assimilation model seeks to integrate the cultures of the ethnic minorities into a centralized national culture or central political ideology of a dominant ethnic group.

The multiple identities model, on the other hand, seeks to cultivate the sense of political unity among diverse ethnic groups, while at the same time upholding and maintaining the social structures and cultural norms that make the groups disparate.

The multiculturalism model represents a system of beliefs and behaviours that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society.

While the multiculturalism model has been noted to be the most appealing in many countries around the world for the purpose of social integration, the findings of the study suggest that it is the least chosen model among the students of different ethnic groups. The Malay and Bumiputera students appeared to prefer the assimilation model while the Chinese and Indian students seemed to be more inclined towards the multiple identities model. It must be noted though that this study was concerned with student self-reported preferences, and as Norlidah Alias pointed out, the results need to be interpreted with caution. A different picture might also emerge if intra-group differences were considered in greater detail, rather than inter-group differences.

Several useful suggestions have been put forward. Two particularly stand out: first, the roles of co-curriculum in inculcating a different set of views and attitudes towards multiculturalism, and second, the roles of teachers as actors in classrooms in the promotion of multiculturalism in their teaching.
First session of the Dialogue: Did our education system build bridges or walls? Professor Dato’ Dr Zakaria Kasa began the session by reviewing the education system before independence. Several acts and reports were mentioned to be key in this time frame, including Barnes Report (Malay Education), Fenn-Wu Report (Chinese Education), Education Ordinance (National School System) and Razak Report (Racial integration and National Education System). After independence, the following were produced:

- Education Ordinance 1957 — Racial integration and National Education System
- Rahman Talib Report
- Education Acts 1961
- Democratization of Education Policy 1962
- Mahathir Report 1979
- Education Acts 1996

A series of developments were reported thereafter, including the National Vision Policy and Education Plans (including Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 — 2025). What is worth noting about the latest development as mentioned during the session is the five system aspirations for the Malaysian education. They centre around access (100% enrolment across all levels from pre-school to upper secondary by 2020), quality (top third of countries in international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS in 15 years), equity (50% reduction in achievement gaps: urban-rural, socioeconomic and gender, by 2020), unity (an education system that gives children shared values and experiences by embracing diversity), and efficiency (a system which maximizes student outcomes within current budget).

Most relevant to the present context of discussion is the focus on unity — an education system that gives children shared values and experiences by embracing diversity. It is most encouraging to note this emphasis on embracing diversity as one of the five main system aspirations, further reinforced in the next discussion slide of Zakaria Kasa which highlights a key attribute ‘needed by every student to be globally competitive’: bilingual proficiency. All this supports a multiculturalism model noted above in which the presence of all diverse groups is acknowledged and respected, and their socio-cultural differences valued.

While this earlier discussion gave some historical insights into the development of the education system in Malaysia, the next panel member not only informed but also impressed and entertained the audience by sharing historical details of the socio-cultural practices within and between different ethnic groups of people in the country, and by showing how the use of conventional ‘clear-cut’ solutions as attempts to solve the problems of the complex and diverse society we have is far from being practical, if not unwise at all. The speaker concerned is Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim, also named the National Treasure by Professor Dato’ Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid.
The complexity comes not so much as an issue of differences between races in the country; rather, it is the differences within ethnic groups themselves that deserve no less attention. No two individuals, even within the same ethnic group, think and behave alike. In other words, focusing merely on ethnic group differences will only lead to unproductive pursuits, and often with undesirable outcomes or results. What, then, might be the focus for a diverse society like ours?

Khoo Kay Kim suggested that it is values — good values, in particular. Values and belief systems, however, seem to have been misplaced in our society today (and consequently in our education system). Instead of stressing the need for developing our students' abilities to reason and argue appropriately, for example, Khoo Kay Kim pointed out that our society and schools place too much emphasis on the number of A's our students are able to score in examinations. The 'bigger picture' of education is therefore, unfortunately, lost in the process.

The need to educate our students since young is also highlighted. Khoo Kay Kim quoted the expression 'The leopard cannot change its spots' to illustrate this point, suggesting that the young child is more easily nurtured than the adult (where it is more difficult to change in adulthood than in childhood). Also emphasized is the point that all individuals in the country need to be made to feel that they belong to this country. To the extent that this is possible, all people, regardless of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, will work together to contribute to the development of the country.

Professor Dato' Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid continued the panel discussion by directly asking the central question of the Dialogue, 'Are we doing enough to unite our multicultural society?' and by openly declaring that 'No, we are not'. He raised a further question, 'Do we want to?' A pessimistic view about the answer to this question was presented, judging from the current state of affairs of the country. He challenged the audience and engaged them to think about what we have not done enough to develop unity within diversity in multicultural Malaysia.

He rehearsed Khoo Kay Kim's arguments, noting the importance of knowing (and being educated to be aware of) the 'real' historical facts of the country in order for the people in this country to live harmoni-ously and for this country to continue to grow well. A question raised in relation to this is whether and to what extent there have been positive changes about integration and equality observed since 1957: have the different races become more 'separate and equal' or 'separate and unequal'? The real challenges we face in uniting our multicultural society, Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid pointed out, are intellectual challenges. These are ideological challenges we must be brave to confront.

Otherwise, such notions as 'values' would just mean nothing. That is to say, both intellectual character and values should go hand in hand and it is only when this is achieved that there is hope for the creation of an understanding and accepting multicultural society in Malaysia.

Other important aspects to consider concern the role of teacher educators and our school curriculum. Are they all in support of a multicultural society or are they more comfortable with, or reflective of, the idea of just making assumptions of the nature of our society? Further, the teacher educator has the responsibility to help to nurture and grow the scholar teacher, one who shares an intellectual orientation that embraces diversity and values socio-cultural differences as resources rather than problems to be solved.

The Q & A session that followed this first session of the Dialogue reinforced many points raised above. Importantly, there is this comment made from the audience on the need for educators to be 'leaders' themselves. That is, whether or not they are working under external pressures or political forces, educators should remain as educators doing their best for their students and for the nation. A further question to ponder upon, raised by another member of the audience, is whether education should be all about quality, or it should also be concerned with unity. This forces all of us to seriously consider the question of 'Are we doing enough to unite our multicultural society?' through education.
The next session began with a speech by Associate Professor Dr Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung on ‘Education policies: Breaking cultural clustering in education institutions?’ She reviewed some education policies, including Education Act 1956 (post Razak Report) which sets the overall framework of vernacular and national schools, with Malay as the national language and through common curriculum; and Education Act 1961 (Rahman Talib Report) with two streams of primary education and one national secondary education, with independent, unaided Chinese schools. The Malay language since the early 1980s has become the main medium of instruction in all national schools and higher education institutions.

However, the education policies, it is argued, need to change in line with changes that take place in such areas as population demographics, student demographics in vernacular and national schools, regional, global and environmental demands as well as national economy. The current policies with a focus on a specific language and curriculum as agents of integration bring with them some limitations, as they have overlooked the close interplay between and among language, culture and race. It was further noted that there is another issue that requires attention, which is about observing the difference between the role of language in uniting people (e.g., as in ‘one language, one nation’) versus that in developing a country (e.g., by using a language with wider usage), or what Fishman (1968) has distinguished as ‘nationalism’ versus ‘nation-ism’. Has using one language so far shown significant impact on uniting people? If it has not, what might the next best option be?

For Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung, promoting a real understanding among the different ethnic groups must go beyond acceptance and tolerance. Open discourse, discussions and meaningful interactions are crucial. People also need to learn to adapt and adopt according to changes in time (and this is not about who is dominant or subservient but rather what is best for the country). There is a need, too, to recognize that the basis for national unity is fair policies in all aspects — social, economic and politics.

The assumption that national integration is achievable through education policies is over simplistic. It is believed that equal opportunities could improve integration and that fair policy is the foundation for integration. This encompasses economic opportunities, equitable distribution of economic wealth, non-discriminative policies in education and employment opportunities. The talk concluded by emphasizing that the focus of policies should be to eradicate poverty, support the down-trodden, and help the weak, irrespective of race, creed or association.
The session continued with the second panel member, Associate Professor Dr Syed Farid Alatas. He began by emphasizing that multiculturalism is not simply about the presence of different races and religions in a place; rather, it is about the understanding, compassion and interest that one group of people has for the other group. This is different from, and goes beyond, the notion of tolerance, which is about mere acceptance of the existence of ‘others’. Two arguments are put forward here. First, we are not a multiculturalist society (yet), although that is clearly our goal (see the earlier discussion of the research paper presentation by Norlidah Alias). Second, we are a tolerant society, but even that tolerance is under threat from time to time. What is critical then is that we need to preserve the high level of tolerance while moving towards realizing a multiculturalist society.

Since the role of education is to bring out the best in people, Syed Farid Alatas recommended that a serious remapping of education or the curriculum is necessary to bring about appreciation, understanding, compassion and admiration among different groups or communities of people. One important way to do so is for major civilizations as represented in Malaysia are taught to all Malaysians: Chinese civilization, Indian civilization and Islamic civilization. Through subjects such as history, geography, literature and even some science subjects, our children can be taught about these three great traditions that make up this country.

Given that we have tolerance and that it is under threat, and given that we want to preserve that tolerance and go beyond that towards a genuinely multiculturalist society, how might we go about that? Syed Farid Alatas suggested that we can achieve that only if we are not hypocritical and if we have a political will. In other words, we want to take the slogan ‘1 Malaysia’ seriously. He further illustrated his point by showing and sharing the historic book, The Contribution of Religion to Peace, published in 1949 and reprinted in 2014 by the Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore.

The book is the result of the formation of the Organization at a lunch party in 1949, well attended by diverse groups of people, including our late Dato Onn bin Jaafar. That is a compelling example of how (even) religious leaders from each faith (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism) could come together for fellowship and dialogue, echoing the important point made by Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung that open discourse, discussions and meaningful interactions are crucial to unite people from different backgrounds and beliefs.

The final panel member is Mr Ho Khek Hua. Based on his experience directing the Department of National Unity and National Integration, the presentation not only highlights the latest results of changes in societal relation index between the years 2012 and 2013, more importantly it draws the audience’s attention to the construction of several key features essential to a good understanding of unity. For example, the concept of ‘clustering’ exemplifies a ‘birds of a feathers’ frame of mind while the notion of ‘diversity’, as illustrated on the very first slide of the presentation, leads to the observation of what ‘makes us beautiful and colourful’.

It was highlighted that unity is about putting aside our differences and seeing the better in each other. In the context of Malaysia, it was shown that the desired outcome is about national identity and shared values. A shared value—societal relationship model was further presented, as follows:

**Individual Indicator (Relation with different ethnic groups)**

1. Cooperate with others
2. Sharing with others
3. Lead by others
4. Trust others
5. Accept decision by others
6. Helping others
7. Reciprocity
8. Caring
9. Accept way of life of others
10. Attitude towards others

All this is an exemplification of personal good conduct.

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*a speech by Associate Professor Dr Rozilini M. Fernandez-Chung on ‘Education policies: Breaking cultural clustering in education institutions?’.*
On the other hand, at the community level, the following was shown:

Community Indicator (Relation with the community)

1. Multi-racial environment
2. Relation with neighbours
3. Friends from different ethnicities
4. Understand culture of others
5. Identity
6. Togetherness
7. Sense of belonging
8. Mutual help
9. Compassionate towards the community
10. Celebrating festivity in the community

All this illustrates civility.

These are the values, at both individual and community levels, that are useful to be instilled in our children since they are young, a view shared by Khoo Kay Kim.

The sharing session ended with the following remarks by the UN Secretary General:

"Yours is a diverse, multi-ethnic & multi-religious nation. You have six languages & six major religions. But you are pulling together in common cause. Everyone celebrates everyone else religious festivals. This habit of living harmoniously — of having a sound social compact — surely underpins Malaysia’s success. This is a core value of United Nations too."

Ban Ki-Moon
22 March 2012

A few issues were raised during the Q & A session, and two are discussed here. The first is the realization that education does not begin at school, but rather has started since the early years of the child with their parents. The parents’ views of the world have an influence or impact on the ways the child perceives the world during childhood, which may stay with them till adulthood. This points to shared responsibilities among parents in shaping and developing a new generation of educated minds for the nation.

Another issue raised concerns the awareness among teachers today of their roles in educating the young minds. Given the current workload and the amount of paper work, do teachers have time to think about and reflect on their essential roles, and thus act accordingly? When teachers teach the subjects or the syllabus rather than educate the young, is that an indication of problems exclusively with our teachers or with the general education system itself?

Extraordinary
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia

Interesting perspective, good content
Efficient Frontier Consulting

Very insightful sessions that were well moderated. Enjoyed the sessions (panels) and would like to be back for more
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Great way to make people understand the education climate in Malaysia
International Medical University
The Dialogue represents a welcome public forum and debate to understand the positive role education can play in fostering respect for diversity. At the same time, it highlights the need to redress the potentially negative role education can play in sustaining the social divisions and prejudices that potentially lead to continuing and extending generations of inequity and protracted conflict. While this latter issue may be sensitive to pursue, it is crucial to understand the complexities involved and to address them.

As Léautier and Sarbib (2006, p. iv) observe,

In a world where students will have to co-exist with people different from themselves, sensitivity and openness to diversity—ethnic, religious, linguistic, and ability-related—is a core part of any good education. Too often, preconceptions about others form the basis for misunderstandings, prejudices, fears, and violence. When countries seek to modernize or reorganize their education systems, for whatever reason, they have an important opportunity to examine what information is being transmitted, how it is being transmitted, and who is delivering it—to ensure that education serves the needs of all citizens.

For our education system to unite our multicultural society then, emphasizing social cohesion in education systems is necessary. It enhances the fundamental goal of good teaching and learning, which is to help every child to become a fully engaged, skilled and responsible individual who will use his or her talents for maximum individual and social benefit (Léautier & Sarbib, 2006; see also Wilkins, 2014).

Education and respect for diversity is a central theme running through the Dialogue. This is certainly not new. The importance of the relationship between education and respect for diversity, as noted in Roberts-Schweitzer (2006), has long been recognized in the Education for All (EFA) goals set by the international community at the World Conference on Education for All in Thailand in 1990, and in the Dakar Framework of Action formulated at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. Other international conventions which voice a similar concern include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that education should be devoid of discrimination and should develop “respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, and for civilizations different from his or her own” and prepare children in a “spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (United Nations, 1989, p. 29).
It may be good at this point to be reminded of the words of the celebrated developmental psychologist Howard Gardner, best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, who suggests five kinds of minds that need to be cultivated in the future. Two of them are relevant to our discussion here: the Respectful Mind and the Ethical Mind. In Gardner’s (2008, p. 26) words:

Our challenge in the world is not in accumulating more knowledge — we are very good at that. Our challenge is to mobilize the knowledge that we have, in the service of ends that we can justify aloud to ourselves and to others; to follow principles even when they go against our self-interest; to take the risk of speaking out when we see injustices occurring; and, to the extent that we can, to create or join institutions that reflect our higher values, our better selves . . . That is why I seek to privilege the Respectful Mind and the Ethical Mind.

Both teachers and teacher educators, as also repeatedly emphasized in the Dialogue by various speakers and members of the audience, have an important role to play in helping to develop students and thus contributing to the nurturing of the Respectful and Ethical Minds. There is a need for intercultural dimensions of courses to be built into the teacher education and professional development process.

These include expertise in interpersonal relations, the conduct of conversations, moderation of difficult discussions, and confronting the most complex task of tackling student racism, class-based exclusions and the lethal mixture of these with religious divides. All this demands a high level of skills and professionalism and at the same time demands institutional support within and beyond schools. In this respect, the role of teacher education institutions needs to be highlighted. As Gundara (2009, p. 1024) points out, these education institutions have a fundamental role to play in unpicking these complex issues and enabling all teachers to deal with them competently.

Conclusion

Although the role of education in uniting multicultural societies has been a focus of discussion for some years now, the Organizing Committee of the Oneness through Education Dialogue is to be commended for gathering together a list of distinguished minds to discuss and debate key challenges that confront multicultural Malaysia. As noted in Roberts-Schweitzer (2006), the relation between education and a respect for diversity can be both positive and negative. Where it is positive, education improves understanding among people, reduces internal and external violence, and enhances the society’s ability to address social concerns. Where it is negative or not appropriately managed, however, education can foster ethnic, economic, and other tensions. Important recent work in this area identifies how, in societies marked by ethnic tension, education can aggravate intergroup hostility through uneven access or denial of access, through its use as a weapon in cultural repression, by manipulating history for political purposes, and segregating students which leads to inequality and reinforces stereotyping (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

The Oneness through Education Dialogue has provided much food for thought about the manner in which the education system might best be managed for a multicultural society like ours. Perhaps more importantly, it highlights the fact that no political decrees or legislation will bring about the revolution in education that we all need, and that it is not a matter of structures or systems or procedures; rather, it is a battle for the mind, the heart and the soul (Chau & Kerry, 2008, p. 6).
References


