

# **Citizenship education from a multicultural perspective: The case of Malaysia**

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## **Introduction**

Citizenship education is a comparatively new subject in many different nations where it has been taken for granted that citizens will follow norms, rules and regulations. It was not until recent times that citizenship education caught the attention of the global world, with more and more focus being given to what constitutes a citizen, the characteristics of a citizen and much more. With the current trend of globalisation, people are becoming world citizens, with individuals seeing their right as a living being; whether they are straight or gay, with or without disabilities, religious or free thinkers, they all want to be citizens of the place they are living in with equal rights, no discrimination whatsoever.

Citizenship education is taking strong root in Asian countries where a sense of nationalism and patriotism has been in existence for centuries. However, such nationalistic roots are founded on love for the nation, which converts to love for leaders and governors of the country. Until recently, in different nations people were willing to sacrifice their lives and everything they possessed for the love of the nation. The historical formation of different Asian countries over the centuries and how multiculturalism is perceived and is developing is an important area to analyse to further enhance citizenship education for current needs. Developed Asian countries like Japan and South Korea have a long history of citizenship education and have been transforming their citizenship education policies to cater to the needs of migrants from other countries. In the book titled *Citizenship Education for Japan*, the authors argue that it is important for Japan to gain further understanding about citizenship education from a range of contexts (Davies, Mizuyama, & Thompson, 2010). The comparison could be between what is traditionally being practiced in Japan compared to how others see citizenship education in Japan. The suggestion that citizenship education in Japan is in flux, plus the need for further investigation into what is necessary in current times, could be examined from a multicultural perspective. This is quite different from South Korea, which used to more of a monoculture society, in the early 21st century. However, in current times, there is a greater embrace of multicultural elements, as evidenced in the school citizenship and moral education curriculum.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. It begins with a brief explanation of what constituted a citizen in ancient times, when society was very structured and confined to a certain demography, compared to current conceptions of citizen in a more borderless world. Here the concept of multiculturalism and Banks' (2004) notion of citizenship education from a multicultural perspective is analysed. The second section analyses Malaysia as a multicultural nation and describes the history of early education based on ethnicity and culture. The final section explains the interplay between multiculturalism and citizenship education and suggests that citizenship education based on a multicultural perspective is necessary for a globalising world.

## **A multicultural perspective on citizenship**

A citizen is generally seen as a native or naturalised member of a state or nation who owes allegiance to its government and is entitled to its protection (see [Dictionary.com](http://Dictionary.com)). Today, the concept of citizenship is hard to define as it relates to many contextual aspects of society, including the individual, family, ideas of right and wrong, freedom, religion and patterns of how a person should behave in society (Taylor, 1994). The world has become a melting pot, consisting of individuals and groups from anywhere and everywhere on Earth. Almost all states have become multicultural in nature, and Asia is no exception. People move from one country to another for multiple reasons. It could be by choice for better work opportunities, personal preferences and many other pull factors. It could be by force due to war, terrorism, political instability and unsafe conditions in one's own country such that they are forced to continue their livelihood in another country. Whatever the reasons might be, there is no doubt that countries are becoming more pluralistic. Thus, citizenship education needs to consider this perspective if it is going to play a role in a multicultural global society.

When there are many different ethnic and religious groups within a nation, citizenship may form the bridge to unify individuals as equals without segregation and discrimination and to bond everyone within that nation (Gross, 1999). Gross (1999) goes on to describe that citizenship connects a person with the state and provides people with universal identity as a legal member of a nation in addition to their other identity that ties them to ethnicity. Questions of citizenship, democracy and multiculturalism are at the centre of global discussions on education reform and affect most of the decisions that we face in dealing with the challenges of contemporary education (Torres, 1998).

Banks (2004) states that cultural, national and global identities are interrelated in a developmental process. It is only logical and sensible that individuals or communities should reflect on their cultural identity before developing a national identity. For a multicultural group which is diverse in ethnicity, religion and culture, the sense of belonging and loyalty to their nation-state can only be a true reflection of themselves if they are allowed to maintain and include their cultures within the nation.

When my team of researchers, which consisted of researchers from different ethnic groups and religions, and I conducted a research study entitled "Malaysian Schools as Spaces for Multiculturalism", it was a challenge, because we had a difficult time inculcating a term to define what multiculturalism is in the Malaysian context. For one senior researcher who had grown up in a homogeneous community but left the country in her late teens to continue studies abroad, multiculturalism had no place in Malaysia, and her culture, which is the mainstream culture, is seen as the hegemony for all. For another researcher who saw religion as everything and linked service to humans and service to God, multiculturalism was broad and had no colour, creed or sexual orientation. For another, to proceed with multiculturalism one had to go beyond religion and politics. Unfortunately, all the members of the research team were so structured and strong minded that until the end we could not coin a term to define our unique multicultural situation, which I now can compare with what is happening around the globe. Just as the individual, accomplished researchers, who were experts in their own field, every nation has its own vision of what it expects its citizens to be and to become.

As Banks (2004) stated, if one is allowed to maintain his or her own culture within the nation, then one should be able to proceed into a wider scope of national identity. However, it is not as simple as it seems to be. Multiculturalism needs to be defined based on local context, which is very complex and deep. Using the notion of "one size fits all" does not seem to work well in discussing current multicultural and citizenship education issues. However, the tension again arises due to global citizenship and certain authorities who define what multiculturalism should be or ought to be.

Many Asian countries with centuries of historical and social eras of multicultural ethnic background seem to be regressing rather than progressing where multiculturalism and interculturalism are concerned. More and more hybrid communities (individuals made up of mixed parentage) are finding it more feasible to live outside their home country rather than conform to structures within their country, which they find rigid and too superficial for the 21st century. Yet, there are opportunities to analyse and learn from previous mistakes that might not be resolved if individuals leave their birth country, as these problems and issues would only remain. The next section will analyse how citizens in Malaysia as a multicultural nation are striving for a voice for all its citizens to be heard. The interplay between historical events, government policies and current needs of citizenship education reforms from a multicultural perspective will be analysed. Suggestions for feasible citizenship education are also examined from the view of Banks that if individuals are able to maintain their own culture and identity, chances are that a national citizenship education policy from a multicultural perspective might work.

## **Malaysia and multiculturalism**