



Journal for Multicultural Education

A novel module for cultivate unity and harmony in multicultural society through arts education

Balamuralithara Balakrishnan,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Balamuralithara Balakrishnan, (2017) "A novel module for cultivate unity and harmony in multicultural society through arts education", Journal for Multicultural Education, Vol. 11 Issue: 4, pp.306-322,

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-03-2015-0009>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-03-2015-0009>

Downloaded on: 26 October 2017, At: 17:03 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 49 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 8 times since 2017*

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:531990 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

A novel module for cultivate unity and harmony in multicultural society through arts education

Balamuralithara Balakrishnan

*Faculty of Art, Computing and Creative Industry,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjung Malim, Malaysia*

Abstract

Purpose – Promoting unity in multicultural society among Malaysians should start from school education since young age. 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 because arts cover the entire learning domain – cognitive, psychomotor and affective. Using the advantages of arts in a child's learning process and its possibilities to create harmony among communities from different races.

Design/methodology/approach – The participants were interviewed using a qualitative approach, which consisted of two main questions: What is your perception on this module through participating in this programme? How the module of this programme has influenced you as a Malaysian?

Findings – The proposed module was implemented, and the findings showed that through arts education, the unity and harmony among children in multicultural society could be flourished and strengthened.

Practical implications – It shows that the proposed arts education module could be used among students from different schooling systems and different races to cultivate unity and harmony among them. At the same time, strengthening the unity among children in multicultural society could bring harmony and peace in future.

Originality/value – This paper is a novel approach that uses arts education as a tool in achieving national agenda to strengthen the unity and harmony among primary school children in Malaysia who are from different races and schooling system.

Keywords Multicultural, Education, Ethnicity

Paper type Research paper

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 per cent), followed by Chinese (25 per cent) and Indians (7 per cent), while others represent about 8 per cent of total Malaysian population. The division range of population witness diversity in language, culture, customs and religious beliefs. Therefore, unity among the Malaysians 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 the Malaysians seems to be feeble compared to 20-30 years ago. The gap between races is widening which can cause more division among the Malaysians.

Aziz et al. (2010) cited that the integration among different races in Malaysia is an uphill task, and there should be a drastic action by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia to think the ways to cultivate the spirit of unity among children in schools.



Promoting unity among multicultural society such as Malaysia should start from an early age, and it must be cultivated since primary school among the 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. 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 languages for education. The different education systems are causing more division among Malaysians because 85-90 per cent in national school are Malays, while 99-100 per cent 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 this hinders cultivation of unity among Malaysian children (MOE, 2013).

The integration between children from various races and cultural backgrounds has not been developed as intended by the government because the scenario in the primary schools seems not reflecting the composition of Malaysian. The school children in primary schools 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 initiatives have been taken by Malaysian Government and one of it was through the introduction of vision school system, it is not successful as hoped. A few core subjects have been taught in classroom that comprise the element of understanding different races, culture and religion in Malaysia, but it is merely a conceptual knowledge which has minimal impact on children (Mustapha, 2009).

Racial integration need to be inculcated, and it is should not be limited through learning conceptual knowledge only, but there should be an environment in the curriculum that enables school children from national and vernacular schools work and create tangible items and products together which allow them to mix with children from other races and appreciate other custom, culture and beliefs (Metzenberger, 2013). Arts education has the capability in terms of its pedagogy to suit the intended curriculum for promoting unity.

Art is an effective way in bringing unity among children through education in schools (Metzenberger, 2013). Arts education is a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools whereby in primary school, the curriculum emphasized on inculcate ideals that transform children to be creative, critical and peace loving (Cherian and Singh, 2014). Isa (2008, p. 31) cited that:

Unity and understanding among the students are further promoted through art appreciation, where teachers encourage pupils to interact and discuss the positive values in the artworks which they have produced.

Unity in a multiracial society can be flourished through activities that involve creation and interaction among individuals from different races, but this is not happening in the current context of Malaysian education system that has been divided into different schooling systems. Therefore, it is important to have a mechanism that could bring school children from different schooling systems under one roof to work together through collaborative activities.

With this motivation, an educational module for both national and vernacular school children that could promote integration, toleration and cooperation among different ethnic groups through the arts education platform was designed and implemented. The module

has been transformed into a programme to identify its effectiveness. This proposed module could be an effective platform to promote unity among school children from different races and different schooling systems. The module is called *UNITY through ARTS* has been designed and implemented among primary school children (11-12 years old) from selected national and vernacular schools in Malaysia. The module was gauged on its effectiveness from the perception of school children who were involved in this programme.

2. Malaysian education system and national unity

Ethnic segregation has become an emerging feature in Malaysia's education system. The Malaysia's 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 *et al.* (2009). Raman and Tan (2010) found that ethnic segregation in schools is very detrimental to a multiracial country like Malaysia where mono ethnic schools – vernacular schools – hinder the process of socialization in a multi-ethnic society through creating an environment that inimical to ethnic relations.

Looking back during the British colonization period before independence, the concept of divide and rule has been imposed in Malaysia according to the races. Education during the colonial period was essentially a divisive force in society and tended to support its ethnic plural population (Raman and Tan, 2010). Before the independence, majority of Malays were residing in rural area, while the Indians resided 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.

A study was carried out by University Malaya researchers and reported in Kaur (2007). The study revealed that only 52 per cent 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 per cent felt that it was an issue, while the majority (63.9 per cent) was more worried about contracting a disease (Kaur, 2007). Those new findings since 2007 data 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.

Ruslan *et al.* (2009, p. 2) 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.

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 behaviours as they getting mature ([Asante et al., 1979](#)).

Education is an important platform 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. [Brown \(2007, p. 8\)](#) 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.

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 to preserve harmony ([Minow, 2002](#)).

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. Civics course was introduced in 1970s that became the compulsory element in primary and secondary school education ([Brown, 2007](#)) to teach the national agenda and instil the values of unity. Civics was replaced with Moral Education which also emphasizing on moral values and citizen education ([Milner, 2002](#)). Moral Education curriculum instils the role and responsibilities of the individual in a multi-ethnic society through pedagogy related to unity and multi-ethnic relationship. [Minow \(2002, p. 18\)](#) 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.

On the other hand, knowledge on spirit of Malaysian and patriotism also imparted in subjects such as Local Studies – primary school and History – secondary level.

[Ahmad et al. \(2010\)](#) have proposed how History education with the adaptation of new pedagogical methods could instil racial integration which is very important in multi-ethnic society in Malaysia.

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 is also identified in contributing the national social agenda by embedding the key elements of national unity concepts in arts pedagogy. The activities in arts education in schools imbibe the positive values towards unity, patriotism and love for country among children from different races.

[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” ([Hilgers et al., 2012](#)). 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 \(2002\)](#), 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. Promoting unity via arts education

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, as the students' learning process involves more on acquiring knowledge via reading. On the other hand, arts education involves all three learning domains – cognitive, affective and psychomotor – as in arts education, students need to acquire the knowledge, apply the skills and characterize the knowledge and skills acquired. These three learning domains are important to build a student capability in all aspects of a subject matter ([Hanna, 2007](#)). In [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. Thus, the cultivation on the concept of unity in multicultural society in a school subject is believed to be more efficient if it involves all three learning domains. All the three learning domains are provided in arts education. Through involvement in arts education programmes, 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 \(1997, p. 81\)](#) cited that “fundamental purpose of performing art forms, engaging with them, and trying to create them is to provoke some kind of personal transformation”. [Heilig et al. \(2010\)](#) ascertained that arts in education could develop empathy, creativity and self-expression in an individual.

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 programmes. Moreover, [Holloway and Krensky \(2001\)](#) found that a large body of evidence suggesting that students' involvement in the arts is positively correlated with higher academic achievement in other subjects. Arts are naturally expressive and, therefore, provide students with opportunities to explore and form new ideas, identities and ways of discover knowledge.

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 \(2003, p. 80\)](#) 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.

The arts also enable students to perform positive forms of expression through relations to others' experiences. 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. [Banks et al. \(2001\)](#) emphasized that social skills are important for students from different ethnics and cultural background to interact effectively whereby [Scriven \(2008\)](#) has found that arts-centred curriculum experience has improved students' social skills. [Holloway and Krensky \(2001, p. 361\)](#) cited 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.

[Hetland and Winner \(2004\)](#) cited that "habits of mind" obtained by learning arts which involves the elements of observation, envision, exploration, engaging, etc. 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 and Lantieri, 2005](#)). Social skills facilitate students from different cultural background to establish a good relationship among themselves.

According to [Roper and Davis \(2000, pp. 218-219\)](#):

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.

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

[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 enables the children to embrace cultural pluralism. Multicultural education programme is able to strength the society which composed of people from different cultures and the value of individual cultures.

In a multicultural society, conflicts do happen. The conflicts are existed from many aspects in which most of the aspects are sensitive enough to provoke racial stir among the society. In this particular situation, each individual needs positive critical thinking skills to

avoid any conflicts or solve any problems that might crop up in a peaceful manner. Arts education experiences provide a conducive platform to develop high-order thinking skills especially critical thinking among the students (Kraus and Chandrasekaran, 2010). A positive critical thinking is pivotal for every citizen in multicultural society such as in Malaysia. Arts education can be fully used as a tool to harness critical thinking among students to preserve the harmony in multicultural society.

Maaruf *et al.* (2013) found in their study that visual arts education in classroom failed to foster tolerance among multi-racial students in classroom due to lack of values that could bind all races together. Thus, a creative solution is needed on how visual arts education could instil the spirit of nationalism and tolerance.

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. As the children are the future backbone of a nation, cultivating the concept of unity via arts education will be a cornerstone for a greater nation with united citizens.

4. Module – unity through arts

Prior to the colonization by the British, Malaysian education system was based on Islamic education under the era of Sultans where arts education is not included in the system. During the British colonization era, Christian missionaries' schools or also known as English schools were established in which the arts education become a compulsory element in the English schools' education system. After independence, the arts education becomes one of the important element in Malaysian education system. Arts education is introduced at every level of schooling system – pre-school, primary and secondary and arts education is a compulsory subject at every level except at higher secondary (Form 4 and Form 5) where the students can choose arts education as an elective subject.

Arts education has a vast benefits in terms of promoting unity and harmony among multicultural society due to the nature of the subject that cultivate self-expression, appreciation, collaboration and critical thinking (Hetland, 2013; Rolling, 2013). Arts education in Malaysia focus on the concept of unity, but the overall mechanism of the education system hinders the unification among Malaysian children at young age due to the different schooling systems. The parents tend to send their children to school that is dominated by their race. Thus, the racial segregation among Malaysian starts at young age, and this situation needs to be fixed. Changing the system is not feasible, as it has been inherited over 50 years ago, but with this proposed module, students from both national and vernacular schooling systems will be put together whereby unification can be flourished.

Ghosh and Galczynski (2014) mentioned that diversity implies a kaleidoscope of thoughts, values, beliefs and as well the people from different backgrounds. This has created the potential of getting perspectives from multi-dimensions point of views. Ghosh and Galczynski (2014) also emphasized that it is vital for schools to foster inclusion via activities – arts related activities – which comprise different groups and recognize diversity as defining component of excellence among students and infuse arts in multi-cultural education pedagogy. Arts education should be a tool to educate students on multi-cultural education because arts could transcend all cultural barriers.

Racial integration among Malaysian is weakening. The segregation among Malaysians from different racial and cultural background has become an emerging feature in Malaysian education system (Raman and Tan, 2010). These situations are unhealthy in the context of plural society that consists of people from different cultures, races and religions. To

overcome this problem, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia has come with a national agenda called One Malaysia – 1Malaysia. The concept of “1Malaysia” – One Malaysia – is to instil 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 (1 Malaysia, 2012). This concept is an important agenda among the Malaysians, and this national agenda could bring Malaysians together much closer and united to achieve the vision and mission of the government. The agenda of 1Malaysia needs to be instilled and cultivated among school children, as they are the future backbone and upcoming generation of Malaysia.

The aspiration of the proposed module – Unity through Arts – is in line with the national agenda of 1Malaysia whereby topics related to the concept of 1Malaysia will be emphasized in this proposed module. This module aimed to bring students from different schooling systems at primary level – national and vernacular – to a common platform and perform arts-related activities together. Muller *et al.* (2013) cited that young children start to participate actively in obtaining knowledge and the required skills in building a well-functioning society with a positive outlook for the future. With this platform, it is believed that children who are from different schools and different races and cultural backgrounds could be inspired to be united.

Ellen and Stephan (2013) should foster the skills of communication and teamwork that could bring the students from different backgrounds together, and arts education could foster those skills effectively. The proposed module is an amalgamation from the concepts which have been studied by Allsup (1997), Cherian and Singh (2014) and Freedman (2003). The models of pedagogy in arts education that have been used in those references were used to build the module for this study.

At the same time, this proposed module will be including different elements of arts such as visual arts, performing arts and music in which all the activities will be focusing on cultivating the spirit of Malaysians among the participants. Concept of unity, integration and harmony are the main cores of this module whereby the activities will be conducted in line with those concepts. The children will be able to express themselves as a Malaysian through arts.

The main objectives of this module are as following:

- to enlighten the students on the importance of unity in Malaysia;
- to cultivate the spirit of Malaysian among the students;
- to introduce students with the diversity of races, cultures and religions in Malaysia;
- to develop students’ critical thinking in the context of multicultural society; and
- to use the benefits of arts education as a tool to promote unity and harmony among Malaysians.

The topics for the proposed module are as followings; the topics will be embedded throughout the activities that will be carried out by the students.

- Who am I as Malaysian?
- Who are they – others – as Malaysian?
- What is 1Malaysia?
- Empowerment of Malaysian via unity.

The module 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:

- who he/she is as a citizen in Malaysia;
- how he/she perceive his/her surrounding as Malaysian; and
- what his/her role as Malaysian.

In this module, it includes some activities that focused on participants' self-knowledge and expression. It 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 are given an opportunity to express themselves through visual expression. This particular topic enhances an individual's *self-expression* in which lead to stronger *critical thinking process*.

Second topic of the programme, 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:

- who are Malaysians? – peers and society at large;
- what is the role of others in Malaysia; and
- 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 consisting of different races and will be given a task to sketch images related to their group members' cultural activities such as festive season, food, etc. The images will be exchanged where the children belong to the particular race will comment on their peers' sketches related to their race cultural activities. The exchange of views enables the other students from different races understand other races cultural values – *diversity*.

The third unit focuses on "What is 1Malaysia"; it addresses the concept of 1Malaysia which becomes the national mission among the students. In this topic, it concentrates on the:

- important aspects of 1Malaysia;
- what is our – Malaysian – role towards 1Malaysia; and
- 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 instils 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 Malaysian patriotism and 1Malaysia were performed by the students in a group. The performance in group will enhance the bonding among the members from different races – shadow drawing – to inform students that human beings are same in nature, but the differences are only in outer look. 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 and harmony* as a Malaysian.

Model of the programme is illustrated in Figure 1.

To test the effectiveness of the proposed module, a small-scale kick-start programme has been carried out among primary school children in Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

The module through programme “Unity through Arts” was held in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia. This programme was held for three-days involving 30 participants from national and vernacular schools in Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia. The participants were from different races – Malay, Chinese and Indian – aged 11-12 years.

Via this programme, we seek to heighten the participants’ understanding as a Malaysian, instil 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 students in each group – where each group had 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 programme. The students need to express their view of each topic through their artwork and presentation in a group.

The activities in the module that were conducted depicted in the following figures (Plates 1, 2 and 3).

5. Methodology

To test the effectiveness of the designed module, students who were involved in this programme were interviewed. Qualitative method was used to get the participants’ perception of the programme and the impact of the activities on them as a Malaysian.

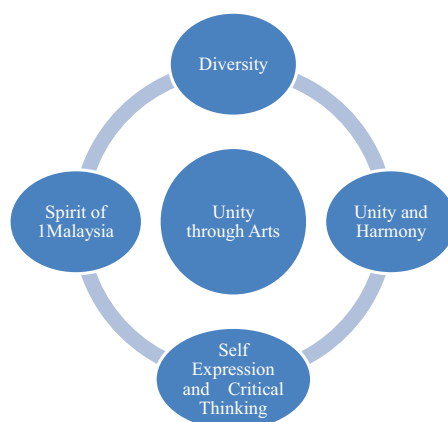


Figure 1.
Model of unity
through arts

All the participants were interviewed, and their statements are recorded. The demographic details of the 30 participants ($n = 30$) who were involved in this interview are depicted as in [Table I](#).

Two questions were asked to the participants:

Q1. What is your perception on this module through participating in this programme?

Q2. How the module of this programme has influence you as a Malaysian?

Plate 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



Plate 2.

The students from different groups participating in a musical performance



Plate 3.

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



Exploring the students' perception on the developed module is important because the theorists have suggested that an individual becoming literate in the context of subject matter as he/she constructs knowledge via interaction with objects – activities in the developed module – and people – team members. It determines the students' motivation and creating the meaning for the knowledge acquired (Xanthoudaki *et al.*, 2012).

All the statements from the interview process for both questions – *Q1* and *Q2* – were gathered and analysed. The analysis process mainly focuses on mapping the codes according to the statements. The interviews were conducted in Malay language – Malaysia national language – and translated into English.

Statements from the interview results were coded according to the answers by the students. For the *Q1*, the researcher would like to get the students perception of this programme whereby the statements from the respondents were coded positive, negative and neutral.

While for *Q2*, the researcher aimed to get the information on the influence of the module on the participants' spirit as a Malaysian. The codes that were adopted are the elements in the model of the module as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

6. Result and discussion

[Tables II](#) and [III](#) provide the number and percentage of the coded responses for *Q1* and *Q2*.

Referring to [Table II](#), 93.33 per cent of the respondents gave positive comments on their perception on the module. This clearly shows that the module gave a positive impact to the participants in terms of their spirit on unity in multiracial country. As one female Malay student put it:

| School type | Gender and no. of students | | Race |
|-------------|----------------------------|---|---------|
| National | Male | 5 | Malay |
| | Female | 5 | |
| Chinese | Male | 5 | Chinese |
| | Female | 5 | |
| Tamil | Male | 5 | Indian |
| | Female | 5 | |

Table I.
Demographic detail of the participants

| Codes | No. of responses receiving this code | % of students' responses |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Positive | 28 | 93.33 |
| Negative | 0 | 0.00 |
| Neutral | 2 | 6.67 |

Table II.
Students comments coded for *Q1*

| Codes | No. of responses receiving this code | % of students' responses |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Diversity | 27 | 90.00 |
| Unity and harmony | 28 | 93.33 |
| Critical thinking | 29 | 96.67 |
| 1Malaysia | 27 | 90.00 |

Table III.
Students comments coded for *Q2*

I feel great with the activities conducted with my friends from different schools and different races. I want to attend this programme in future if I were given the opportunity because all the activities taught me the concept of unity and harmony.

From this comment, the respondent could accept her team members as her friends, although they just got to know each other three days ago. This outcome is in-line with the study from [Scriven \(2008\)](#), and [Rawdon and Moxley \(2016\)](#) found that arts education could promote better social skills among the students. Also, [Muller et al. \(2013\)](#) found that co-operative hands-on assignment that involves members from different cultural background build positive value that celebrates diversity among the team members. Thus, the activities that have been embedded in this module cultivate the good relationship among students from different races.

At the same time, one Indian male student put it:

It is a good programme and I really enjoyed it. Through the arts activities, I learn better about the concept of unity and harmony in Malaysia compared to Local Studies and Moral Education that have been taught in classroom.

The programme has given a platform for the students to understand the concept of unity and harmony effectively compare to other subjects. [Posner and Patoine \(2009\)](#) found that arts activities increase students' cognitive development as well as intellectual competencies. Thus, educating the students on the concept on unity and harmony via arts education is better than other subjects because the affordances of arts education to improve students' cognitive development and this is in-line with [Eisner \(2002\)](#) who found that arts could strengthen cognitive abilities and critical-thinking skills. [Ellen and Stephan \(2013\)](#) suggested that arts education should be given the importance to foster human experience that cultivate the culture of unity among society that consists of different races.

On the other hand, 6.67 per cent of students – two respondents – have responded neutral on their perception of the module. One of the respondents – Chinese female – who responded neutral has commented:

I could not say whether I like the programme or not. I could not mix well with other team members from other schools. I feel very shy since I am not good in Malay language.

This comment has shown that the student was not able to have neither positive nor negative perception on the programme due to the inability to communicate well with students from different backgrounds. Thus, vernacular schools need to emphasize on the proficiency of national language in their teaching and learning process. Language is also an important tool for unity and harmony among multiracial society ([Joseph and Taylor, 2014](#)).

Referring to [Table III](#), all the elements that have been included in the module have been influenced the participants, as each element has more than 90 per cent of responses. It shows that the activities in the module have influenced the students to embrace the values in each element that have been embedded in the programme.

One male Chinese student put it:

Art is the best tool for national unity since I was able to value the concept of 1Malaysia through arts. Colours have made me appreciate the diversity exists in Malaysia.

From this comment, the respondent was able to appreciate the diversity which existed in Malaysia via colours. It shows that colours are important since colours affect human responses affectively and cognitively ([Burchett, 2002](#)). It is worth to take note that the role of colours plays a vital role in promoting unity through the appreciations of diversity of

cultures which existed around us could be linked with variety of colours that used in arts education.

One male Malay respondent commented:

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 1Malaysia.

From this comment, it clearly shows that the arts activities that have been carried out by the students in group have contributed towards the understanding of the concept of unity and spirit of 1Malaysia. Involving in arts-related activities and producing art work together in a group could strengthen up the rapport and communication among the team members (Ellen and Stephan, 2013). As pointed out by Ruslan *et al.* (2009), there should be a mechanism that could integrate students from different schooling systems in Malaysia, and this kind of activities could promote integration among children from both national and vernacular schooling systems. Thus, in promoting unity and harmony in a multiracial society among children, teamwork is an essential element that needs to be given priority to develop the spirit of oneness.

One Indian female student put it:

I can express myself who am I as Malaysian and who we are as Malaysian through arts.

I started to appreciate others' from different races with different cultural values and languages.

The comment from student shows that how the arts activities have develop the ability of the student to express herself as Malaysian and strengthen her thinking skills to think who she is as a Malaysian whereby Bowen *et al.* (2014) have found that arts are very effective medium to develop self-expression and enhance critical thinking skills among children. Therefore, arts become a pivotal tool for educating student on unity.

The main challenge in implementing this programme was the language barrier. The students from different schooling systems were not able to communicate well among each other due to the lack of proficiency of the national language – Malay – among students from Chinese and Tamil schools.

Overall, via the adaptation of this module in arts education in both national and vernacular primary schools, it could bring a positive impact on promoting racial integration and also cultivating unity and harmony among Malaysian. When the children are exposed with the concept of 1Malaysia via arts education using the proposed module, both national and vernacular schools could be co-exist while strengthening the national unity. Swaminathan and Schellenberg (2016) cited that arts education can develop students' cognitive development in non-arts domain in which it is high time for educationists and policymakers to use arts in educating children on unity in multicultural society.

7. Conclusion

This Unity through Arts module demonstrates how arts education could be used to teach students about national unity. The potential of arts education and its related activities positively affect students' experiences and teach them about national unity. The study has 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 developed their self-expression and critical thinking skills in

the context of appreciation towards diversity that existed in Malaysia. This can be seen as an important aspect in harmonization of multi-races and multi-cultural society.

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 via arts education can be provided to students where students were encouraged to fully engage in participatory and expressive activities. Arts educators and policymakers should put forward a strong effort so that the potential of arts education in promoting national unity and harmony could be realized.

References

- 1 Malaysia (2012), available at: www.1Malaysia.com.my (accessed 11 March 2014).
- Ahmad, A.R., Rahim, A., Seman, A.A. and Salleh, M.J. (2010), "Malaysian secondary school history curriculum and its contribution towards racial integration", *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 7, pp. 488-493.
- Allsup, R.E. (1997), "Activating self-transformation through improvisation in instrumental music teaching", *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 80-85.
- Asante, M.K., Newmark, E. and Blake, C.A. (1979), *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills.
- Aziz, Z., Salleh, A. and Ribu, H.E. (2010), "A study of national integration: impact of multicultural values", *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 7, pp. 691-700.
- Banks, J.A. Cookson, P. Gay, G. Hawley, W.D. Irvine, J.J. Nieto, S. Schiofield, J.W. and Stephan, W. G. (2001), "Essential principles for teaching and learning in a multicultural society", available at: <http://education.www.cwu.edu/teaching-learning/sites/cts.cwu.edu/teaching-learning/files/documents/diversityunity.pdf> (accessed on 15 June 2014).
- Bowen, D.H., Greene, J.P. and Kisida, B. (2014), "Learning to think critically a visual art experiment", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 37-44.
- Brown, G.K. (2007), "Making ethnic citizens: the politics and practice of education in Malaysia", *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 318-330.
- Burchett, K.E. (2002), "Color harmony", *Color Research & Application*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 28-31.
- Carlsson, N. and Lantieri, L. (2005), "Changing vision of education", *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, TC Press, New York, NY, pp. 107-121.
- Cherian, R.M. and Singh, J. (2014), "Rendering cross-cultural transformation using art for peace education: a study of windows project in Delhi", *History*, Vol. 14 No. 35, pp. 7-15.
- Deasy, R. (Ed.) (2002), *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, Arts Education Partnership, Washington, DC.
- Edwards, K. (1994), "North American Indian music instruction: influences upon attitudes, cultural perceptions, and achievement", D.M.A. Dissertation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.
- Eisner, E.W. (2002), *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Yale University Press, Connecticut.
- Ellen, W. and Stephan, V.L. (2013), *Educational Research and Innovation Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts Education: The Impact of Arts Education*, OECD Publishing.
- Freedman, K. (2003), "Social perspectives of art education in the US: teaching visual culture in a democracy", *Studies in Education*, Vol. 42 No. 4, pp. 40-67.
- Gardner, H. (1983), *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Guetzkow, J. (2002), "How the arts impact communities: an introduction to the literature on arts impact studie", Center of Arts and Cultural Studies. Working Paper Series (20), Princeton University.

- Ghosh, R. and Galczynski, M. (2014), *Redefining Multicultural Education: Inclusion and the Right to Be Different*, Canadian Scholars' Press, Toronto.
- Hanna, W. (2007), "The new bloom's taxonomy: implications for music education", *Arts Education Policy Review*, Vol. 108 No. 4, pp. 7-16.
- Heilig, J.V., Cole, H. and Aguilar, A. (2010), "From Dewey to no child left behind: the evolution and devolution of public arts education", *Arts Education Policy Review*, Vol. 111 No. 4, pp. 136-145.
- Hetland, L. (2013), *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, Teachers College Press.
- Hetland, L. and Winner, E. (2004), "Cognitive transfer from arts education to non-arts outcomes: research evidence and policy implications", *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education*, pp. 135-162.
- Hilgers, M.G., Flachsbarth, B.B. and Elrod, C.E. (2012), "Collaborative international education: reaching across borders", *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 45-56.
- Holloway, D. and Krensky, B. (2001), "The arts, urban education and social change", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 354-365.
- Isa, B. (2008). "Art in the service of multiculturalism", *Best Practices & Teaching Modules of EIU*, available at: uitm.edu.my/v1/images/stories/publication/badrul/multiculturalism.pdf (accessed 19 June 2014).
- Joseph, J.E. and Taylor, T.J. (Eds) (2014), *Ideologies of Language (RLE Linguistics a: General Linguistics)*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Kaur, S. (2007), "Many youngsters aren't concerned about racial integration", *The Star*, March 29, 2007.
- Kraus, N. and Chandrasekaran, B. (2010), "Music training for the development of auditory skills", *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, Vol. 11 No. 8, pp. 599-605.
- Maaruf, S.Z., Siraj, S., Hashim, K.S. and Zulkifli, V. (2013), "The tolerant classroom: challenges in fostering multi-ethnic tolerance in visual arts education", *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 90, pp. 795-802.
- Metzenberger, J. (2013), "A novel approach to exploring the concept of resilience and principal drivers in a learning environment", *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal*, Vol. 7 Nos 2/3, pp. 192-206.
- Milner, A. (2002), *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge University Press.
- Minow, M. (2002), "Education for co-existence", *Arizona Law Review*, Vol. 44 No. 1.
- MOE (2013), "Ministry of Education", available at: www.moe.gov.my (accessed 14 Mac 2014).
- Muller, U., Ahamer, G., Peters, H., Weinke, E., Sapper, N. and Salcher, E. (2013), "Technologies and collaborative education strengthen conviviality in rural communities in the alps and in Senegal", *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal*, Vol. 7 Nos 2/3, pp. 207-227.
- Mustapha, R. (2009), "Social integration among multi-ethnic students at selected Malaysian universities in peninsular Malaysia: a survey of campus social climate", *ASEAN Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 35-44.
- Nyaberi, D.O. (2009), *An Arts Based Educational Framework for Fostering Intercultural Unity in Kenya*, 1st ed., Proquest, UMI Dissertation Publishing.
- Posner, M.I. and Patoine, B. (2009), "How arts training improves attention and cognition", *Cerebrum*, available at: www.dana.org/news/cerebrum/detail.aspx?id=23206 (accessed on 19 June 2014).
- Raman, S.R. and Tan, Y.S. (2010), "Ethnic segregation in Malaysia's education system: enrolment choices, preferential policies and desegregation", *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, Vol. 46 Nos 1/2, pp. 117-131.
- Rawdon, K. and Moxley, D. (2016), "Connecting social work and activism in the arts through continuing professional education", *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 431-443.

- Ruslan, N., Othman, A. and Ahmad, I.S. (2009), "National integration in vision school: towards '1 Malaysia'?", available at: http://irep.iium.edu.my/18163/1/ICD_1Malaysia_paper%5B1%5D.pdf
- Rolling, J.H. Jr. (2013), "Art as social response and responsibility: reframing critical thinking in art education as a basis for altruistic intent", *Art Education*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 6-12.
- Roper, B. and Davis, D. (2000), "Howard Gardner: knowledge, learning and development in drama and arts education", *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 217-233.
- Samovar, L.A., Porter, R.E. and Stefani, L.A. (1998), *Communication between Cultures*, Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Scriven, T.V. (2008), "The short-term qualitative impact of an interdisciplinary arts-centered curriculum on rural, at-risk middle school students", Doctoral Dissertation, The Florida State University, (Publication No. AAT 3321525), available at: http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses_1/available/etd-04082008160531/unrestricted/ScrivenTSpring2008.pdf (accessed 14 May 2014).
- Swaminathan, S. and Schellenberg, E.G. (2016), *Chapter 15: Arts Education, Academic Achievement and Cognitive Ability*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 364-384.
- Thomas, M. (2012), "Utilizing the arts as effective platforms for peace education: teaching about South Africa's anti-apartheid movement through its music", *Peace Studies Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 22-50.
- UNESCO (2006), available at: www.unesco.org (accessed 14 Mac 2014).
- Xanthoudaki, M., Tickle, L. and Sekules, V. (Eds) (2012), *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries: An International Reader*, Springer Science & Business Media, Dordrecht, Vol. 2.

Corresponding author

Balamuralithara Balakrishnan can be contacted at: balab@fskik.upsi.edu.my