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Transforming Malaysian Teacher Education for a sustainable future through student-centred learning

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Abstract

In Malaysia, recent Ministry of Education policies have encouraged the introduction of student-centred learning approaches for secondary teacher training programmes. These policies are substantially affecting how teacher education programmes throughout the country are being conducted. This paper examines student-centred learning models as an alternative to traditional Malaysian teacher-centred learning models for promoting sustainability in student teachers. The paper will report on the preliminary results of research on a Malaysian university teacher education programme. A qualitative approach was adopted to examine learning from students' points of view. Results show education students generally hold very positive views of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

Keywords: Teacher education, education students, student-centred learning, qualitative research

Introduction

Malaysian Vision 2020 has been the catalyst for far reaching reforms in Malaysian educational policy. The country's commitment to the education sector is evident in the following statement:

Malaysia needs to make the critical transition from an industrial economy to a leader in the information age. In order to make this vision is reality, Malaysian need to make a fundamental shift towards a more technologically literate, thinking workforce, able to perform in a global work environment and use the tools available in the information age. To make this shift, the education system must undergo a radical transformation. The schooling culture must be transformed from one that is memory based on one that is informed, thinking, creative and caring through leading edge technology.

(Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1997, p.1)

Education is one of the most powerful elements for bringing about the changes required to achieve sustainable development. Teachers are the main actors in this process and teacher education training is key for developing the capacities in teachers to deliver sustainable educational approaches in the future. Sustainability in education is characterised by critical thinking, reflection, systemic thinking, engaging in partnerships and active participation through personal empowerment (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004). These same elements are goals of student-centred learning approaches. The goals of student-centred learning approaches are therefore consistent with, and characterise sustainable education.

The recruitment of teacher trainees, the duration of training, and the content and methods of training tend to vary with the changing needs of the educational system. This has been true in Malaysia. Teacher education programmes that place emphasis on the teaching knowledge, values and skills are important for bring about behavioural and attitudinal changes in students. Thus, in order to

empower education students to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future, these students should be at the centre of a forward looking academic learning atmosphere.

Malaysian Education System

Educational reforms in Malaysian education systems have been ongoing since the 1980s. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has produced a number of documents that have provided direction to education reforms in Malaysia. Each of these documents has introduced policies that promote student-centred approaches to teaching. For example, the New Primary School Curriculum had been progressively introduced from 1982 to 1988. Then in 1988, the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum was introduced as a continuation of the New Curriculum Primary School to achieve the aims of the new National Education Philosophy. Each document stimulated the introduction of curriculum reforms that were significant for translating the notion of the National Philosophy of Education into practice in secondary and primary education. The philosophy incorporates the ideals of a national citizenry whose members are wholesome and balanced in all dimensions of human development, as well as being able to contribute to the well being of fellow members and to the nation (Ministry of Education, 1993).

The philosophy contains explicit guidelines for teaching and learning approaches in the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum. This philosophy stated that the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the secondary school classroom is dependent on teachers' instructional approaches. Chapter 5 of the document (Ministry of Education, 1990) prescribes that teachers are expected to practice more student-centred rather than teacher-centred approaches. The Ministry translates the National Education Philosophy into education plans, programmes and projects congruent with national aspirations and objectives, and also formulates guidelines for the implementation of these programmes and projects. The reforms are in contrast to historically used teacher-centred approaches. Teacher-centred approaches employ a directive methodology that results in control of the instructional process. In other words, the teacher is regarded as the source of expert knowledge that is communicated to the students through direct lectures in a classroom environment, and students obediently listen to the lecture. The learning mode tends to be passive and the learners play little part in their learning process. The focus is on the content, i.e. how much material has been delivered and how much students have learned (Pratt, 1998). In contrast, student-centred learning approaches regard knowledge as constructed by students and the lecturer is a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information (Kember, 1997).

An overview of teacher education in Malaysia

Formal teacher education programmes in Malaysia started in the early 1900s. Initially, teacher training concentrated on preparing teachers to teach in primary schools. Training for teachers to teach at secondary schools was conducted by colleges located in Britain as Malaysia was a British colony. Formal secondary teacher training in Malaysia started in the 1960s after the establishment of the University of Malaya in 1949 and other public universities in the late 1960s.

The main goal of teacher education programmes is to ensure that all schools have teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to enable students to learn. The teacher education programmes are entrusted with the responsibility for training future teachers in line with the National Education Philosophy, the Philosophy of Teacher Education, and the policies, plans and projects that have been introduced to teacher education programmes in Malaysia.

The demands of the National Education Philosophy and the Philosophy of Teacher Education increased expectations on educators and required a shift in role from a didactic transmitter of knowledge to that of a facilitator of learning. Furthermore, with the advent of constructivist learning

theories, emphasis shifted from “robotic learning” and “memory-based learning” to learning for understanding. Teachers were expected to transform from being a “the sage on the stage” to “a guide on the side”. The teaching strategies were developed for experiential learning such as discussion, demonstration, and group learning. The goal of teacher training is to prepare teachers who function effectively within the new context and demands.

However, the shift in focus on learning from the conventional to the constructivist perspective has presented Malaysian educators with serious challenges. The traditional “chalk and talk” methods of teaching were used for decades in Malaysian educational system and are not easily abandoned. The literature reveals that the preferred teaching methods in most classrooms of Malaysian secondary schools are still teacher-centred approaches or at best a mixture of both student-centred and teacher-centred (Fauziah, Parilah, & Samsuddeen, 2005; Norzila, Fauziah, & Parilah, 2007). These studies suggested that classroom learning environments were far from what is envisioned in the National Education Philosophy by the Ministry of Education.

Rationale of the study

The roles and functions of teacher education programmes have a strong relationship with the national school system in Malaysia. Teacher education programmes are responsible for training secondary school teachers who are equipped to implement national education policies. With the significant expectations placed on teacher education programmes by the Malaysian government, how teacher education students learn is an intriguing question for education researchers. How do education students experience the teaching and learning approaches at their university? What learning strategies do they adopt? Many believe that the learning preferences of the education students have a significant relationship to their future teaching styles because “teachers teach the way they learned” (Dunn & Dunn, 1979, p. 241). This circumstance has generated interest in exploring the learning environments found in Malaysian teacher education programmes in order to obtain further understanding of how education students perceive the teaching and learning approaches that underpin the Malaysian National Education Philosophy. If professional education of teachers is to play a role in this reform effort, then the teacher education programme is the most significant factor in teaching reform.

Research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the learning experiences of education students in a Malaysian teacher education programme by exploring their learning strategies. Two research questions are derived from this research objective:

1. How do Malaysian education students experience learning in their teacher education programme?
2. What learning strategies do Malaysian education students adopt in their teacher education programme?

Methodology of the study

Research design

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to investigate learning experiences among education students in a Malaysian teacher education programme. This study used semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. This paper presents preliminary data from this research.

Participants

This study collected data from students who were preparing to become secondary teachers in Malaysia and who were enrolled full-time in a university concurrent degree programme. A total of 12 final-year education students from a teacher education programme in Malaysia were involved in the study. The participants were between 23 to 24 years old, and 60% were male and 40% were females.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between 17 December 2009 and 29 January 2010, three weeks after the opening of semester in the academic year 2009/2010. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted before and after students' lecture hours. All the interviews were conducted in Malay language and lasted for forty-five to sixty minutes.

Data analysis and Findings

Participants reported that they learn more effectively and enjoyably through active learning techniques such as group discussion, students' presentation and projects implementation.

“I can learn better when I actively participated in the classroom discussion ...I can understand others' opinion and can provide mine too” (P1).

“I like to be active in class, ask questions, discuss with friends and participate in group activities...I can learn better when engaging class projects and then presenting the outcomes to the class” (P3).

“I believe I can learn best and have fun when participating in group discussion, class presentation and team project” (P11).

Participants further stated that they actively participate in their learning by searching for and locating information.

“Prior to starting any groups' discussion, I would search the related topics from internets, or borrow some books from the library. I would ensure that I was prepared with the topics, so that I know what points would be discussed, and I could also give comments to others” (P3).

“I don't think knowledge just comes from text books. We can also search knowledge from other sources such as article journals, newspapers, magazines, and memos. I would prefer teachers asking us to seek extra knowledge rather than limiting the information only to what have been told in the classroom” (P4).

Participants indicated that projects better supported their learning than examinations.

“I prefer ongoing assessments compare to the final exams. The final exams just evaluate our limited ability...our memorization, but ... for assignments; they will evaluate many kinds of skills and understanding” (P2).

“Doing assignments meant I had to end up with classroom presentation. I had to be fully prepared in terms of knowledge and skills. I had to be confident in presentation. Well... beside knowledge construction, I also gained necessary skills” (P8).

The majority of participants reported that they accept responsibility for constructing new knowledge for their own learning. Participants reported that when they were encouraged by their teacher educators to actively seek out and construct meaning from information and previous experiences, their learning was enhanced. However, active participation also meant greater effort.

“Sometimes lecturers asked us to explain what we were thinking and shaped our responses by connecting to previous learning...particularly on topics that were not discussed in details during class” (P10).

“Our lecturers did encourage us to formulate what we know by forming creative connections between prior knowledge and new possibilities” (P11).

Participants became motivated when treated with respect as adults’ learners.

“I felt really motivated to learn better when the lecturers encouraged us with authentic praise. They treated us like adult learners...” (P4)

“For me, when teachers and students could build good relationships, it would eventually lead to motivation for learning. We would feel that we were being cared, respected and supported... as adult learners” (P6).

We were highly motivated to learn when the lecturers were nice to us in class...they formulated connections between our experiences... what we just learned and the world outside the classroom... (P12).

However, some participants reported student-teacher relationship was not well developed. Some instructors were categorized as experts who control and actively direct how the knowledge should be developed.

“Sometimes we just accepted whatever lecturers told us in class...well...we are less knowledgeable than the lecturers...” (P3).

“...we couldn’t freely express our opinions or ideas in classroom. Some lecturers made us felt they were experts in their fields and therefore we had no rights to intervene their teaching” (P5).

Discussion

The study provides evidence that Malaysian education students have been exposed to some elements of student-centred learning approaches. It appears that when student-centred learning approaches were used, students were actively engaged in the learning process. They were indeed learning and embracing elements of student-centred learning such as engaging various types of active classroom learning strategies, enhancing their responsibility as students in knowledge construction and developing good relationship with teacher educators.

The data elaborate upon the participants' experiences in active learning strategies by participating in classroom learning activities such as group discussion, classroom presentation, project-based learning and accessed-based learning. The data further illustrate that more than half of the participants were aware of their own responsibilities to play active roles as students rather than passive. The participants' responses also show that they were quite responsible in active knowledge construction process for material that has not been explicitly discussed in class. The data show that most of the participants indicated satisfaction regarding relationship with their teacher educators. It was evidence from the interview transcripts that the satisfaction was not only attributable to the degree of their learning participation but also to their motivation for learning.

This preliminary data analysis implies that Malaysian teacher educators are employing several student-centred learning techniques in their classroom teaching practices. The findings support earlier research (Ismail & Alexander, 2005; Luan, Bakar & Hong, 2006). However, several comments from the participants imply that some instructors are reluctant to shift their own roles from being the expert to being the facilitator of learning. Such participants comments evidence that teacher-centred are still being used in the teacher education programme.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that Malaysian teacher education programmes are moving towards student-centred approaches. Findings also suggest that student-centred learning approaches facilitate learning in the Malaysian teacher education programmes. The approaches promote active learning by empowering students to take more responsibility for their learning and to increase their involvement and participation in the learning process. The active learning approaches also enhance the development of skills in critical and analytical thinking that seem to be better developed than in the traditional setting. These learning approaches will promote teacher education programme for a sustainable future with a similar goal on improving academic and higher-order thinking skills to foster meaningful learning for life.

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