

THE NEED OF PARADIGM CHANGE AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION; THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

As the home of many ethnic groups, Indonesia is a showcase of diversity. On the one hand Indonesians benefited in many crucial sectors such as economy and tourism from the rich diversity of its natural and human resources but on the other hand the country is facing a high risk of intergroup friction. The government of Indonesia attempted to end social conflict and disintegration in many ways, from interfaith dialogue to military occupation. Despite of all progress, little has been done to find a fundamental resolution. This study examines the importance of paradigm change in understanding conflict. The New Order approach in conflict resolution suggests that conflict is destructive and therefore needs to be avoided. However, conflict can also be constructive and in order to deal with conflict in a constructive way, institutions or organizations must be aware of this two-fold concerns and citizens must be educated in the skill to face conflict. Going deeper in the plea that education constructs a nation, using the same analogy, peace education should also construct a peaceful nation. Finally, this study proposes the use of multicultural literature to reconstruct the notion of conflict through the practice of multicultural education in early childhood education.

Keywords: conflict, multicultural education, literature, childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

With more than 300 ethnic groups, 700 ethnic languages, 6,000 inhabited islands, and 250,000,000 population, Indonesia is a vast platform of diversity. On the one hand, the country's rich diversity is a treasure, but on the other hand Indonesia is facing a high risk of intergroup friction. In 2009, Gadjah Mada University in Cooperation with The Asia Foundation released data showing that approximately 832 cases on social conflict were reported during 1990-2008 alone (Fauzi, 2009: 7). The quest for an ideal conflict resolution is a steady

concern.

This study started with a concern that many conflicts are partly or left unresolved in many parts in Indonesia. The Indonesian Institute of Sciences reported that despite the numbers of conflict occurred in the past decade, Indonesian government lacks essential conflict management plan and strategy. Not only that it does not offer a long term conflict resolution, Indonesian government tends to offer a reactive resolution. In Poso, for example, government mediated agreement revolves around temporary resolution such as

security forces and military occupation, leaving the underlying cause and triggers such as interreligious issues at risk of reemerging (Ahmad, 2011: 20). As a result, although violence and physical conflict are less encountered, social conflict is becoming a latent threat to peace building effort in Indonesia.

Although Indonesian government has no grand strategy in developing a multicultural education on its national curriculum, the issuance of the Act of The Republic of Indonesia Number 20 year 2003 article 4 on National Education System that includes national pluralism is an indication that plurality is already taken into account as a crucial aspect in the national education. Since the fall of Suharto's government, a number of research on conflicts resolution in Indonesia has been continuously conducted, but conflict research utilizing education as the approach is still outnumbered.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Prevention is better than cure. This general maxim of prevention is the underlying principle why study on the role of early education in of conflict prevention holds a significant contribution in the peace building efforts. From the point of view of prevention, schools and classrooms are the best places to educate citizens about the importance of peace and nonviolence (Panggaben, 2006: 220-223). A grounded understanding on the concept of conflict

and diversity in early childhood education practice is essential in building a stronger concept of the value of difference and diversity of their surroundings.

This study specifies its focus on early childhood education for two reasons. First, as Robinson (2006: 4) points out, the early childhood years (from birth to age 8) are formidable years in the growth and development of cognition, language, social, emotional and physical competence. As children are developing their concept of 'self' and 'others', it is important that they develop a positive feelings towards differences in a social contexts where issues related to human diversity and difference impact significantly on children's understandings of and ways of being in the world. Second, a study on early childhood education is amicrocosm of the broader society (Robinson, 2006: 8). Early childhood institutions (formal, non-formal or informal) constitute and perpetuate many of the normalizing discourses that underpin social structure through educational programmes, educators' pedagogies, and the curriculum of everyday interactions and practices.

PROBLEMS WITH DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Since the late 1980s there has been a significant increase in awareness of the importance of early childhood education policies, practices and curriculum positively reflecting the diverse cultural identities of

children and their families. In order to present broad perspective on difference in early childhood education in Indonesia, the term difference will be broadly defined in this paper, from culture, religion to individual preference and learning style. It is important to highlight that early childhood institutions like preschools, playgroups and kindergartens consisted of heterogeneous group from a variety of backgrounds, with a multiplicity of family backgrounds that operate around children's concept of diversity and difference.

Conducting research on early childhood education, Kerry Robinsons and Criss Jones Diaz (2005: 4) points out the many possible variables constructing children's perspective on difference:

Children do not enter early childhood programmes as empty slates but rather bring with them a myriad of perceptions of difference that they have taken up from their families, peers, the media and other social sources and negotiated in the representations of their own identities. Glover (1991) in the early 1990s found that as 2- and 3-year-old children become aware of differences they simultaneously develop positive or negative feelings about the differences they observe.

It is then important for social and educational institutions to provide a balance, non biased perspective of this diverse world to children. Tracing back on the dynamics of multicultural education in Indonesia, there is a flaw on how the

society perceive conflict as one of the most crucial factors triggering social conflict. It is the concept of the conflict itself.

Samsu Rizal Panggabean (2006: 217-220) in *Educating to Handle Conflict and Avoid Violence* proposed an idea that we reconsider how approach to conflict has been done so far. Panggabean described our approach to conflict as practicing the New Order approach which hold the following characteristics; First, conflict is always destructive, evil and negative. Conflict is regarded as evil because it challenges stability and disrupts social harmony. This perspective featured strongly under the Suharto regime, as it puts stability and economic growth above all other national concerns. Under New Order rule, stability was to be maintained at all costs, to the extent that a paradoxical situation existed, namely when the effort to maintain stability itself resulted in violence. For these reason, conflict should be repressed if not avoided. As a result, our children are not prepared with the skill to resolve conflict. They master the skill to avoid conflict with teacher, parents, or higher authority yet we question why our children cannot communicate and bravehearted to face problem. Second, conflict is a behavior. In government perceptions and in media reports during the period under discussion here, conflict was usually presented as 'behavior', especially violent behavior. Therefore, when the word 'conflict' is mentioned, it evoked images such as stabbing,

struggling, rioting and other violent behaviors. The unobservable is not yet a concern. But then what about feelings of anger, distrust and resentment? These negative feeling opted out from what defines a conflict and therefore not taken into consideration because they were not perceived as part of a conflict. We do not teach our children to consider that these negative potentials can lead to violent conflict yet question why children nowadays are short tempered and susceptible.

PARADIGM SHIFTING AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

It requires further research on how peace education in early childhood education can contribute to conflict resolution in Indonesia or around the world. What this paper try to examine is that at least there are two fundamental options that we can do to better prepare our children in this diverse and globalized world; first, we need to have a paradigm change in understanding conflict and second, it is crucial that our children are introduced to the concept of difference and diversity in a social context.

As Panggabean points out earlier, there is a need to learn new approaches to understand conflict. The first tenet is to recognise that as well as having a negative and destructive impact, conflict can also have positive and constructive influences. Educators, parents, and policymakers

must understand the two-fold position of conflict in society.

Conflict is similar to cooperation in the sense that it needs to be handled creatively, and must be handled within universally accepted rules of the game, so that it can benefit the society. Conflict is needed to avoid ossification in a society. The energy or dynamics of a society can arise from powerlessness. During the crises in many parts of Indonesia, people who were previously powerless began to be more dynamic and energetic. The experience of going through the crisis during a period of *pancaroba*, or interregnum, may strengthen the people and the state. The more serious the crisis, the more energy emerges, which can then be used to strengthen and cement the society in the future (Panggabean, 2002: 221).

An interesting case in a Japanese preschool on how teacher design her class to engage in fights more often is worth telling to discuss the practice of conflict education. Catherine Lewis' comparative research on American and Japanese preschool and elementary education points out an interesting fact that Japanese preschool teachers do actually design their classes to risk conflict (2002: 84-85). A very good way, as Lewis (2002: 84) puts it, "Teacher planned activities so that children had to share and even, as children get older, we put fewer toys. Teacher plan things so that there will be more fighting as children get older." Another strategy, as

explained by another school teacher is by gradually develop conflict. "... she began the school year by gradually putting out enough paintbrushes for all the children but gradually reduced the number so that children within each group would have to coordinate their use of each color." Sharing paint brush is one of the teambuilding skills developed in conflict resolution. Instead of giving enough paint brushes for all students, they are taught to solve problem by developing skills to negotiate. In addition, students also develop team-building skill and shape perspective of others; that some people will not share but some others will.

Introducing the concept of difference and diversity is also important in childhood development. In a more globalized world like today, it is impossible to eliminate difference to foster unity. ASEAN member's involvement in the AFTA (ASEAN Free Trade Area) agreement will lead to improvement of economy of the ASEAN regions enable the intensification of cross-cultural contact as well as friction among nations (<http://www.asean.org/communities/> Dec. 30, 2013). If the future ASEAN community and future leaders are not well equipped with a substantial understanding of the concept of diversity, peace building resolution will forever be an impossible mission.

The use of multicultural education, including multicultural literature in promoting diversity in education system is a growing concern. Rizvi (in Robinson,

2006: 70) describes multicultural education as centering around teaching children about other cultures in an attempt to combat racial prejudice and stereotypes, in order to dispel ignorance which was seen to be the root of intolerance and prejudice. Parents and educators must see ignorance, stereotyping, and prejudice as conceptualized attitude. They can either encourage individuals to reduce these negative attitude or support mobilization of individuals to be engaged in them. It is therefore, crucial for the society to develop children's positive attitude and provide them a balance perspective of the world. Research conducted by Robinson and Jones Di'az (2000: 100) who investigated policy and practices with regard to diversity and difference found that in settings with proportionately high levels of children attending from diverse language and cultural groups, there was greater focus on visible difference than when there were less obvious physical differences.

Although there are so many possible media to promote diversity such as movies, songs, food and festivals, etc., this section will focus on the use of multicultural literature in fostering the concept of diversity as a peace education strategy. Multicultural literature is a byproduct of the multicultural education movement of the 1960s and 'a concept in search of a definition'. This paper lays the following discussion on Terrel Young's brief definition of multicultural literature. Young defines multicultural literature as literature

by and about people belonging to the various self-identified ethnic, racial, religious, and regional groups in a country (Young, 1995: 376). In addition, Glazier and Seo (2005: 686) defines multicultural literature as literature that represents voices typically omitted from the traditional canon. Multicultural literature introduces characters of diverse background and thus invited its reader to explore new ways of viewing people of parallel cultures through the different perspective of the characters. Norton (1990, 1991) and Walker-Dalhouse (1992) reaffirm that multicultural literature is a powerful tool to help students develop an understanding and respect for individuals of all cultures while at the same time gaining an appreciation of their own cultural and literary heritage (Young, 1995: 377- 378).

The media, popular culture and children's literature play a major role in the perpetuation of heteronormativity in children's everyday lives. Children's literature and films provide numerous examples of the ways in which different cultures, norms and values are practiced around the world. Through literature, children are taught attitudes and actions appropriate for themselves and their society. A rich literary selection, across nation and culture can provide balance to the predominantly mainstream to children as well as appreciate minority culture. Let us take the discussion of woman emancipation figure in Indonesia as an example. Have our children heard enough

story about other woman emancipation figure other than Kartini? What about Sundanese patrician Dewi Sartika, Tanettelese queen Siti Aisyah We Tenriolle, Acehnese Sultana Safiatuddin, or Padangnese journalist Rohana Kudus? It is through reading nonstandard selections that students will be able to appreciate the contributions of non Javanese women and members of parallel cultures have made to our country in history, science, and the arts. How can we expect them to be a man of tolerance and respect if they do not have enough concept of others?

Children's experiences in their early years have a profound impact on their later social, emotional and cognitive development (French, 2007: 9). I believe it is time for us to take a step further from a traditionalist theories viewed children as consumers of the culture established by adults. This view is oriented towards the child's present rather than the future. Ignoring the fact that children will play role and may even hold authority to take decision to construct society in the future. Corsaro (in French, 2007: 10) support this argument by asserting that, children and adults alike should be seen as active participants in the social construction of childhood and in the reproduction of their shared culture. Children are seen as having agency and power within their own right, not just in relation to the social constructions assigned to them by adults. One must now see children as active agent in their social development

process having characteristics as "... rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and to other children." Furthermore, they are intelligent, co-creator of knowledge; a researcher actively seeking to make meaning of the world. It is through participating in everyday activities/routines and play, children absorb messages from people and the environment regarding their identity and social values. As a consequence, there lays responsibility for us; educators, parents, and community to teach and play as role model for children to respect differences. A research paper on children's early learning and development by Geraldine French (2007: 9) points out that:

Practitioners should be aware of and respect areas of difference such as gender, faith/no faith or family structure. These form part of a child's home experience and individual identity. Difference in this sense should be respected in every aspect of early childhood work. By exploring our own and other cultural daily practices/routines, we gain appreciation of our common humanity as well as providing the optimal environment for children's cognitive, emotional and social growth.

For anyone considering in taking multicultural education as a serious concern, allow me to summarize the 1997 National Early Years Network's (in French, 2007: 14) research report which revealed that greater involvement by parents in their children's care and education leads to: (1)

more sharing of information between parents and practitioners/childminders; (2) parents spending more time in the setting, parents improving their knowledge of parenting and child development generally; (3) family values and beliefs being understood and taken account of by the practitioner/childminder; (4) a more emotionally secure environment for the child, parents being viewed as valuable resources bringing added value to the setting, parents feeling more confident about engaging in dialogue regarding their children's later education.

CONCLUSION

Diversity in our globalized world has challenged traditionalist view on children as consumers of the culture established by adults. Early childhood education are seen as a formidable moment where children develop their cognition, language, social, emotional and physical competence. As informal, formal, and nonformal education play important role in forming children's attitude toward the world, it is our responsibility; parents, educators, and society as a whole to better prepare children in understanding diversity in this complex world by; first, understanding the twofold concept of conflict. Reconstruction of the concept of conflict is necessary in peace education to provide children conflict resolution skills. In addition, by teaching children to face and solve conflict, they will be trained life skills such as responsibility, teambuilding, negotiation

and tolerance. Second, by utilizing multicultural approach in early childhood education. Introducing multicultural literature, accross culture and across nation, will provide a rich view on children's attitude to minority and other social issues caused by diversity.

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