

Fostering Multicultural Competence among Teachers: SEAMEO's Policy Framework

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Abstract

Multicultural competence is a crucial component of effective teaching, and promoting it among teachers is a major endeavor globally. Regional organizations, such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in the ASEAN context, have emerged as key actors in fostering multicultural competence among teachers. This study aims to investigate SEAMEO's commitment to promoting multicultural competence among pre-service teachers by utilizing Gorski's five approaches to multicultural teacher education as a theoretical framework. The study analyzes and evaluates SEAMEO's specific approaches to fostering multicultural competence among educators. The findings reveal that SEAMEO has demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting multicultural competence among teachers by utilizing two approaches, including teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance and teaching with multicultural competence. These approaches emphasize the importance of respecting diversity, tolerance, and preparing future teachers to teach and learn in response to students' diverse backgrounds, based on the principles of liberal multicultural education. The findings argue that SEAMEO can further expand its policy and practice to also prepare future teachers to address diversity-related issues, such as discrimination, oppression, and inequality, still faced by marginalized students in schools and society, both within each nation and the ASEAN region. This study highlights the importance of regional organizations in promoting cultural diversity and inclusive education and provides insights into the specific strategies employed by SEAMEO in fostering multicultural competence among teachers.

Keywords: multicultural competence, multicultural teacher education, inclusive education, diversity,

Background of the Study

Multicultural competence, also referred to as multicultural teaching competency (Spanierman et al., 2011) or cultural competence (Diller & Moule, 2005), entails an active process whereby teachers engage in self-reflection and examination of their attitudes and beliefs regarding cultural diversity issues. It involves acquiring knowledge about various cultural groups and evaluating how this understanding influences instructional management, teaching methods, and interactions with students and parents. Ultimately, it encompasses the ability of teachers to effectively educate students from diverse cultural backgrounds. To achieve this, teachers must demonstrate sensitivity, self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and proficiency in cross-cultural teaching skills. Multicultural competence encompasses three key domains: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The significance of equipping teachers with multicultural competence is widely acknowledged. When teachers recognize its importance and possess knowledge and understanding of cultural competency, they can effectively promote and enhance family and community involvement in their students' education (Hawk, et al., 2017). Moreover, the development of

cross-cultural competencies and the provision of training to teach in diverse contexts empower teachers to confidently address cultural diversity and apply the principles of multicultural education (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Additionally, research conducted by Spanierman et al. (2011) highlights that teachers who have undergone multicultural training demonstrate higher proficiency in multicultural teaching skills and knowledge compared to those who have not. Hence, the acquisition of multicultural skills and knowledge is pivotal in facilitating the effective teaching of subjects that are culturally sensitive or rooted in diverse cultures (Banks, 2013; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Extensive research has been conducted on multicultural competence, and several notable studies have shed light on this topic. Ladson-Billings (1995) made significant contributions by proposing concepts and approaches that foster culturally relevant pedagogy among teachers. Gay (2018) offered a range of approaches aimed at equipping teachers with culturally responsive teaching techniques. Hsiao (2015) developed a comprehensive framework for cultural competency, providing valuable insights into the essential skills and knowledge required by teachers in this domain. Arnesen, Allan, and Simonsen (2010), with the support of the Council of Europe, conducted a study focused on identifying teacher competencies for effectively teaching about cultural diversity in the European context. Hamilton (2016) conducted a study that examined the multicultural teacher competency scale among teachers in the classroom. These studies play a significant role in advancing our understanding and promoting the development of multicultural competence among educators.

Promoting multicultural competence among pre-service and in-service teachers at the national level and through teacher education institutions has been a prominent endeavor. However, with the emergence of regional communities such as the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the promotion of multicultural competence for teachers has expanded beyond individual nations to involve collective efforts. Regional organizations have emerged as key actors in promoting multicultural competence among teachers, alongside their other initiatives. EU, as an example, has demonstrated a strong recognition of the value of cultural diversity and the necessity of inclusive education. The EU has taken proactive measures to promote the development of cross-cultural competence for teachers within its region to effectively engage with diverse student populations. A notable initiative undertaken by the EU is the creation of a common teacher training framework that integrates diversity values. The aim of this framework is to ensure that teacher education programs across EU member states incorporate multicultural competence as an essential component (Arnesen et al., 2010).

In the context of ASEAN, it has gradually taken on an active role in fostering multicultural competence among teachers. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization or SEAMEO under ASEAN is an entity that is expected to promote multicultural competence for teachers. SEAMEO was founded in 1965 with the aim of strengthening regional cooperation in the areas of education, science, and culture to promote moral, ethical, and fundamental freedoms values (SEAMEO Secretariat, 2021). The SEAMEO Council, which includes 11 Ministers of Education from 11 countries, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste, was also established as the top governing body of SEAMEO. In the ASEAN context, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) plays an active role in advocating for the promotion of multicultural

competence among teachers. Established in 1965, SEAMEO's primary goal is to strengthen regional cooperation in education, science, and culture, with a particular emphasis on fostering values such as morality, ethics, and fundamental freedoms (SEAMEO Secretariat, 2021). The SEAMEO Council, consisting of 11 Ministers of Education from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste, serves as the governing body of SEAMEO. This council provides strategic direction and guidance to promote educational excellence and cultural understanding within the region. However, the extent of SEAMEO's commitment to promoting multicultural competence among teachers and the specific approaches or strategies it has employed for this purpose are not widely recognized or extensively documented, especially in theoretical frameworks. Therefore, further exploration and research are needed to gain a deeper understanding of the specific methods and initiatives employed by SEAMEO to effectively promote multicultural competence among educators within the ASEAN region.

This study aims to investigate SEAMEO's commitment to promoting multicultural competence among teachers by utilizing Gorski's (2009) five approaches to multicultural teacher education as a theoretical framework. By applying this framework, the study seeks to analyze and evaluate the specific approaches employed by SEAMEO in fostering multicultural competence among educators. This study offers insights into SEAMEO's initiatives in promoting multicultural competence among teachers and contributes to the broader discussion on the role of regional organizations in fostering multicultural competence among teachers.

The paper will outline Gorski's multicultural teacher education framework, describe the research methodology, present the findings, and engage in a discussion of the results.

Multicultural Teacher Education Framework

The study's theoretical framework is based on Gorski's (2009) Multicultural Teacher Education (MTE) approach, which identifies five different approaches to develop teachers' multicultural competence. The first approach, known as "teaching the other," perpetuates existing power imbalances by using othering language and promoting assimilation. The second approach, "teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance," encourages teachers to appreciate and celebrate cultural diversity, while recognizing their own biases. The third approach, "teaching with multicultural competency," focuses on developing teachers' multicultural competence and cultural responsiveness to better address the needs of culturally diverse students. The fourth approach involves critically analyzing educational policies and social structures to promote fairness and equality. The fifth approach involves developing teachers as agents of change to resist oppression and promote social justice.

Using the Multicultural Teacher Education (MTE) framework allows for a better understanding of the theoretical basis behind SEAMEO's policy design and programs to promote multicultural competence for teachers within the education systems of its member nations. This approach also enables the identification of potential shortcomings in SEAMEO's implementation of these approaches, taking into account the diverse backgrounds and challenges faced by its member nations.

Research Methodology

This study utilized Krathwohl's (2009) qualitative document analysis method to examine SEAMEO's policies on teacher multicultural competence. Two main documents, SEAMEO's Seven Priority Areas 2015-2030 and Strategic Plan 2021-2030, as well as activities/projects, were analyzed in-depth. Additionally, information available on SEAMEO's website was reviewed as part of the analysis. The document text analysis was conducted using Gorski's (2009) multicultural teacher education (MTE) framework as a guide. This methodological approach facilitated a systematic and rigorous exploration of the different components and aspects of SEAMEO's teacher multicultural competence policies.

Findings

SEAMEO's Commitment to Culturally Competent Teachers

SEAMEO, an ASEAN regional organization, prioritizes multicultural education and the preparation of culturally competent teachers. This commitment is reflected in its core values, priority areas, and establishment of specialized regional centers.

SEAMEO's values: Two out of the nine clear values highlighted by SEAMEO are directly related to cultural education, which are respect for cultural diversity and inclusiveness. These values reflect their commitment to promoting a culturally inclusive and diverse educational environment.

Seven Priority Areas 2018-2035: these areas were announced in 2014 and are influenced by global agendas such as Education for All (EFA). Two out of the seven priority areas are specifically related to cultural education. The first priority area focuses on early childhood education and aims to provide greater educational opportunities for disadvantaged children, including those from rural areas, ethnic communities, and children with disabilities. The second priority area aims to eliminate barriers that hinder fundamental learning opportunities for marginalized learners in society, with a focus on innovative approaches.

SEAMEO Regional Centers: SEAMEO has established several regional centers to improve the quality of teachers and education personnel in specific areas. These centers include, such as, SEAMEO Regional Center for Quality Improvement of Teachers and Education Personnel in Language (SEAQIL) and SEAMEO Regional Center for Quality Improvement of Teachers and Education Personnel in Mathematics (SEAQiM), which operate under the supervision of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, and SEAMEO Regional Center for Special Educational Needs (SEAMEO SEN) located in Malaysia. SEAMEO SEN, founded in 2009, specializes in education to support and meet the diverse needs of children with different disabilities, gifted children, and those with abilities in the Southeast Asian region. The analysis shows that SEAMEO SEN is the center most relevant to the preparation and development of teachers with multicultural competency. It conducts research and disseminates knowledge through training programs and academic conferences.

The SEAMEO Teacher Project: Promoting Cross-Cultural Learning for Pre-Service Teachers

SEAMEO's "Pre-Service Student Teacher Exchange," known as the SEA-Teacher Project, was established in 2016 to enhance teaching skills and promote cross-cultural learning for pre-service teachers or student teachers. The project aims to develop pedagogy, English language proficiency, regional and global perspectives, and teaching experiences in diverse and flexible cultural contexts.

In 2018, the SEA-Teacher Project witnessed the participation of 94 universities from the region, with 47 from Indonesia, 27 from the Philippines, 19 from Thailand, and 1 from Malaysia (SEA Teacher, 2018). Over the course of eight cohorts, the project facilitated student teacher exchange activities. The cohorts are as follows (SEAMEO Secretariat, 2020):

- Cohort 1 (2016): 22 student teachers from 2 universities in Indonesia and Thailand.
- Cohort 2 (2016): 41 student teachers from 13 universities, including Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand.
- Cohort 3 (2017): 25 student teachers from 13 universities, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.
- Cohort 4 (2017): 201 student teachers from 41 universities, the same countries as Cohort 3.
- Cohort 5 (2018): 281 student teachers from 63 universities, also the same countries as Cohort 3.
- Cohort 6 (2018): 107 student teachers from 41 universities, also the same countries as Cohort 3.
- Cohort 7 (2019): 496 student teachers from 85 universities, also the same countries as Cohort 3.
- Cohort 8 (2019): 240 student teachers from 62 universities, including Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.

These data demonstrate a steady increase in the number of student teachers participating in the project, growing from 22 in 2016 to 240 in 2019. The number of participating student teachers remains relatively small compared to the total in the region, and the project's reach is limited to two to four of the eleven member countries. Initially focused on Mathematics, Science, English, and Early Childhood Education, the project expanded in Cohort 4 (2017) to include students from various disciplines such as Economics Education, Elementary Education, Social Studies Education, Geography Education, Business Finance, Biology, Physics, and Applied Economics. Participants teach abroad for one month, engaging in teaching observations, assisting in teaching, performing teaching duties, and conducting activity-based lessons. Host universities provide mentors to oversee and monitor the students throughout their training.

Furthermore, the assessment of Cohort 8 identified primary challenges faced by student teachers, which require attention to enhance the project's efficiency. These challenges included communication issues between sending and host universities, immigration-related obstacles, insufficient orientation, mismatched exchange program duration with host school calendars, and financial constraints affecting student teachers' participation and resource access (Rismayanti, 2019).

SEAMEO 2021-2030 Strategic Plan: Advancing Multicultural Education and Empowering Teachers

The final component is the SEAMEO 2021-2030 Strategic Plan, which was developed by representatives from various agencies under SEAMEO, the member countries' SEAMEO Regional Centers (e.g., EU), and the SEAMEO Secretariat (SEAMEO Secretariat, 2021). The strategic plan consists of three important dimensions, namely, the education dimension, the science dimension, and the cultural dimension. Each dimension comprises seven key issues.

In the education domain, there are seven key issues and 93 projects identified. However, only four of these issues reflect an awareness of cultural diversity in education and teacher preparation. These four key issues are as follows:

1. Enhancing access to early childhood education, with a focus on children with special needs.
2. Eliminating barriers to educational opportunities.
3. Restoring teacher education and professional development.
4. Developing 21st-century curricula.

As for the projects that promote teacher training with multicultural competence, there are four projects such as projects focusing on changing the behavior of children with special needs and policies on bilingual education derived from the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) meetings.

In the cultural domain, there are also seven key issues and 26 projects. However, only three of these issues are directly related to multicultural education and teacher preparation. They are: Creative traditions, customs, and innovations, Peace and understanding between cultures, and Literacy and cultural awareness in the modern world. Moreover, from the 26 projects, only three are part of the efforts to prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms, which include:

1. Awareness and development of teaching and learning media for intercultural understanding in Southeast Asia.
2. Appreciation of arts curriculum for teachers/students.
3. Enhancing awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding Southeast Asian cultures.

To illustrate, in addressing peace and cultural understanding, a curriculum development project has been implemented to promote art appreciation for teachers and students. The indicators for this project include: 1) Research and development activities on integrating peace and cultural understanding in the classroom 2) Increasing the number of secondary schools that integrate cultural-based education into their curriculum by at least 10% annually.

Apart from the key issues and projects, there are indicators in the strategic plan that illustrate the scope of multicultural education. For example, the number of secondary schools in Southeast Asia that integrate cultural education to promote local cultures and products, the number of research and development activities on intercultural understanding in classrooms, and the number of annual activities that educational institutions should organize to promote global citizenship education, sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, peace, non-violence, and appreciation for cultural diversity in pursuit of sustainable development.

Discussion

This study investigates the efforts of SEAMEO in promoting multicultural competence among teachers in the ASEAN community. Through an analysis of pertinent documents,

it becomes evident that SEAMEO is firmly dedicated to cultural education and the cultivation of culturally competent teachers. This commitment is reflected in the organization's core values, priority areas, and the establishment of specialized regional centers. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Arnesen et al. (2010), which also emphasizes the EU's commitment to promoting inclusive education and preparing teachers to navigate cultural diversity. However, Arnesen et al.'s research highlights that there is variation in the implementation of multicultural competence initiatives in teacher education across EU member nations. Kymlicka (2005) argues that the concept of multiculturalism and the rights of minority groups have gained widespread recognition due to the acceptance and implementation of International Standards on Minority Rights by various international organizations, including the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Labor Organization, among others. States have embraced the principle of multiculturalism in their approach to minority groups and have established monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with these standards. In a similar vein, SEAMEO, as a regional organization, promotes the development of multicultural competence among teachers to foster cultural diversity and inclusive education.

Upon analyzing SEAMEO's policies on multicultural teacher competency, it was found that they align with two of Gorski's (2009) approaches to multicultural teacher education. These approaches are "teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance" and "teaching with multicultural competency." The former encourages teachers to appreciate and celebrate cultural diversity while acknowledging their own biases, while the latter focuses on developing teachers' multicultural competence and cultural responsiveness to better meet the needs of culturally diverse students. In theory, both approaches reflect a liberal stance, emphasizing the celebration of diversity and the promotion of tolerance (Gorski, 2009). SEAMEO's policies on multicultural teacher competency are based on these approaches. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of teachers demonstrating tolerance and respect towards cultural differences. This is achieved by fostering an understanding and sensitivity towards cultural diversity, including self-reflection and evaluating personal biases. Secondly, SEAMEO aims to equip future teachers with the essential knowledge and skills to successfully integrate multicultural curriculum and teaching methods. This includes preparing teachers to cater to the diverse learning needs of students in different cultural environments. By prioritizing cultural diversity, inclusiveness, and addressing the educational needs of marginalized and diverse students, SEAMEO fosters a multicultural education system that prepares teachers to effectively navigate diverse classroom environments. Continued efforts and collaboration within SEAMEO's framework will contribute to the development of culturally competent teachers who can create inclusive and equitable learning experiences for all students in the ASEAN region.

However, it is important to recognize that a liberal stance alone may not sufficiently address the deeply rooted power imbalances and structural inequalities that arise from cultural differences. SEAMEO's policies should also emphasize the integration of teaching practices that take into account the sociopolitical context and promote teaching as a form of resistance and counter-hegemonic practice (Gorski, 2009). This aspect is currently not adequately addressed in the existing policies. With the increasing complexity of diversity and the accompanying challenges faced by nations and the ASEAN region as a whole, it becomes increasingly critical to properly equip teachers to serve as agents of change in such contexts. The ASEAN region grapples with several pressing issues, including the Rohingya crisis, ethnic conflicts arising from differences,

social disparities between the majority and minority populations, migration and labor exploitation, human rights and democracy concerns, gender-based violence, and environmental challenges like deforestation, pollution, and climate change. These examples highlight the urgent need for comprehensive teacher preparation programs that specifically address these complex and interconnected challenges. To achieve this, it is imperative to actively involve them in critical reflection and analysis within the socio-political context of multicultural teaching. This necessitates the incorporation of approaches that actively challenge power dynamics, including counter-hegemonic teaching and active participation in social movements at any level—whether within the classroom or in wider educational settings. By equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical approaches to navigate and address these issues in the classroom, we can foster greater understanding, empathy, and active citizenship among students. Such programs would contribute to building a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable ASEAN community.

The SEAMEO Teacher Project plays a vital role in fostering multicultural competence among student teachers by providing them with valuable opportunities to teach in international settings. The program has seen a steady increase in participation. Hendra et al. (2019) conducted interviews with five student-teachers who participated in the SEA teacher program and found that they acquired skills in overcoming religious sensitivity, addressing language barriers, managing content subject differences, and adapting to various school climates. The study revealed that these student-teachers acquired skills in overcoming religious sensitivity, addressing language barriers, managing content subject differences, and adapting to various school climates. Additionally, the experience of teaching different cultures provided the pre-service teachers with valuable preparation to become globalized educators, equipped with diverse experiences in teaching students from various cultural backgrounds. This study emphasizes the importance of such experiences in shaping the readiness of future teachers to effectively engage with and teach students from different cultures. While the project has shown growth in terms of the number of participating student teachers and the inclusion of various disciplines, there is a need to explore ways to further expand the project's reach to a larger number of member countries within the ASEAN region. This discussion could focus on strategies to increase participation from underrepresented countries and address the challenges mentioned, such as improving communication between sending and host universities, addressing immigration-related obstacles, enhancing orientation programs, aligning exchange program durations with host school calendars, and providing financial support to ensure equal opportunities for student teachers' participation and resource access.

The SEAMEO Teacher Exchange Project, as a valuable initiative within ASEAN member countries, plays a crucial role in fostering multicultural competence among pre-service student teachers. This approach is widely recognized in equipping future teacher with multicultural competence. By providing opportunities for cross-cultural learning, this project enables student teachers to develop a deeper understanding of diverse teaching skills and culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches within the ASEAN region. It serves as a stepping stone towards creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that values and respects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students. However, while the project has demonstrated growth in terms of the number of participating student teachers and the inclusion of various disciplines, there is a need to further expand its scope to encompass a larger number of member countries within

ASEAN. The exploration of strategies to increase participation from underrepresented countries and address the challenges that have been identified is necessary. This includes, such as, identifying ways to increase participation from a broader range of countries, ensuring smoother logistical processes, providing comprehensive support and training for student teachers, and establishing sustainable funding mechanisms. Ultimately, the goal is to strengthen the project's capacity to promote cross-cultural learning and develop future teachers who are culturally competent, adaptable, and equipped to address the diverse needs of students within the ASEAN region.

Conclusion

SEAMEO's efforts in promoting multicultural competence among teachers in ASEAN demonstrate a strong commitment. They align with Gorski's approaches to multicultural teacher education, emphasizing cultural sensitivity, tolerance, and multicultural competency. SEAMEO's core values, priority areas, and specialized regional centers reflect its dedication to fostering a culturally inclusive and diverse educational environment. To address power dynamics and inequalities, SEAMEO can explore further opportunities for critical reflection and analysis among future teachers. The SEAMEO Teacher Exchange Project fosters multicultural competence among student teachers through cross-cultural learning. To enhance its impact, expanding reach, improving communication, and providing support and training are necessary. Collaboration within SEAMEO will develop culturally competent teachers and create an inclusive education system in ASEAN.

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