

THE PULL FACTORS OF MINORITY STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Sports activity is substantial for the wellbeing of students in schools. Sports activity has many social benefits. With special reference to minority students' participation, sports are seen as a tool of social integration, especially in a multi-ethnic environment. This development has augured well and supported the idea of Malaysia as it nurtures cooperation among students of different ethnic groups in schools. This paper attempts to elucidate the nature of sport as a tool for social integration by looking at the existing programme of Sekolah Berwatak (sports-based character school programme). The study was conducted in the district of Pekan, Pahang. In order to obtain relevant data, Focus Group Interview (FGI) was employed with a sample of 40 students of Orang Asli, Cambodian, Rohingya and Chinese groups. Data collected through FGI has been processed using qualitative analysis. Our findings show that there are four factors such as training sessions, sports competitions, family tradition in sports and teachers' role triggered social integration among students of different ethnic groups in sports. Thus, this paper will give an added value to existing knowledge on sociology of sport as it touches on the issues related to race, ethnicity and education.

Keywords: Ethnicity, social integration, minority students, *Sekolah Berwatak*

INTRODUCTION

Physical activities and sports programmes are essential to schooling environment. Students benefit from these activities either through teaching and learning processes or extra-curricular activities. Apart from the physical and emotional benefits gained through physical and sports activities, it serves as a tool in the process of social integration. Due to these benefits, sports is viewed as one of Malaysia's national agenda. The Malaysian government wants to ensure total participation of the population in sport, especially through the 'Sport for All' and 'High Performance Sport' policies (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan, 2009). Sports activities in schools have fulfilled both policies. All students are required to participate in sports especially during Physical Education subject and at the same time, teachers can identify new talents. The involvement of Malaysian citizens in sporting events is in line with the Malaysia spirit, which is important in the nation building process, especially in a multi-racial and multi-religious country like Malaysia.

Correspondingly, schools are socializing agencies that help the government to introduce sports to the masses. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has placed a lot of attention to combine both academic and extra-curricular pursuits to produce well-rounded students who can take the country to the international arena where sports are concerned. The teaching of physical and health education as well as sports sciences in schools have triggered the importance of sports in schools. Although there are no specific instructions by MOE to schools regarding their sports preferences, it is ideally witnessed that some schools have chosen one specific sport to excel in. The selection of sport is based on school administration

as they have full freedom to choose the kind of sport which suit their students. They have excelled in a particular sport and to some extent, the society identifies them through these sports. The sporting activities thus become the image, identity and character of one's school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, the Malaysian government is practising 'Sports for All' and 'High performance Sports' policies (National Sports Policy, 2009; Khoo, 2005). These practices are mentioned in the National Sports Policy. For the society at large, sports participation is encouraged to maintain a healthy physical and mental lifestyle, hence generating social unity among citizens (Khoo, 2005). In the context of Malaysian schools, the manifestation of sports-based activity is inspired by the National Education Philosophy. It is stated that:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are well responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large. (MOE: 12)

Consequently, it is clear that MOE is keen on sports-based activities in Malaysia. The implementation of sports-based activities can be seen specifically via various circulars such as *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 2/2007* [Circular No. 2/2007], which specifically mentions time management of co-curricular activities at school level. In addition, *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil 9/2000* [Circular No. 9/2000] speaks on safety measures during outdoor physical education activities. The implementation of co-curricular activities is substantially mandatory. The latest development of Malaysian education system has also shown the government's earnestness when it implements the programme "IMurid, ISukan" (One Pupil, One Sport) in ensuring total participation of school pupils in sports-based activities (MOE, 2011). To make it more serious, students' involvement in co-curricular activities (club or society-based, uniform-based or sports-based) in schools contributes to the 10% marks for getting admission to public universities.

We can also see serious efforts by the government through the MOE when it comes to sports competition among school students. Malaysia School Sports Council (*Majlis Sukan Sekolah-Sekolah Malaysia* or MSSM) has organized various inter-school sports competitions from district to national levels (Khoo, 2005). The introduction of sports schools in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur and Muar, Johore is an evidence of the government's determination in promoting sport to the highest level possible. These two sports schools are meant to prepare the next generation of athletes among students.

Sports and physical activities should be considered as part of learning process (Hammond, 1953). In the context of schooling experience, sports should be seen as a tool of integration (Laker, 2000), especially in a multicultural society where minority groups need to embrace the national educational systems. Previous studies have proven that sports participation among students in schools and colleges has spurred school attendance (Smith, 2010; Kew, 2001) and reduced violence in schools (Nixon II, 2002; Leornand II, 1998; Woods, 2007). Sports indeed has a role in regulating students' behaviours (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Unfortunately, research on sports as a tool for integration in Malaysian schools and the outcome of sports participation among students of different ethnic groups are not adequately addressed or discussed in Malaysia. This paper attempts to bridge that gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative methods. Qualitative methods help researchers to understand meanings and experiences from the emic (participants) perspectives. It takes into consideration impression, words, sentences, photos and symbols of a specific group or culture. Moreover, instead of trying to convert social life into variables or numbers, qualitative research borrows ideas from the people and places that are being studied within the given context (Bryman, 2008). Hence, it gives a holistic description and outlook of social life. Additionally, this approach allows the researchers to be flexible while initiating and collecting data. There is no need for the researchers to prepare the expected proposition, rather it allows their participants to express their feelings and opinions about the issue. According to Liamputtong and Ezzy (2010), qualitative methods help researchers to understand how people see things and make sense of their experience, which cannot be provided by quantitative methods.

Research Participants and Data Collection

In this study, the researchers have recruited their participants by using purposive sampling. They have chosen 40 students from the ethnic groups of Orang Asli, Cambodians, Rohingya and Chinese from two schools. These students are between the ages of 13-17 years old. They are involved in the track and field events (athletics) and volleyball thus representing their schools in various tournaments. To obtain meaningful data, focus group interview (FGI) was utilized due to its flexibility nature. Additionally, FGI reduces the feelings of anxiety and embarrassment because everyone gets to participate in the discussion. In assisting the participants, vignettes were designed to stimulate the discussion. All FGIs were conducted in Malay language. To preserve the actual words of the respondents, all interviews have been audio-taped with the respondents' knowledge and consent. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the respondents. The data collected from FGIs was analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

The result of this study is divided into four push factors. The push and pull factors of minority students' participation of sports can be divided into four namely; a) Training session and competition, b) schooling community engagement and support, c) family tradition, legacies and previous experience, and d) teacher's role.

Training Session and Competition

The researchers found that the school has ensured that these minority students receive proper coaching and training. They attend training sessions at least thrice a week. They also utilise physical education period to perform this training. Additionally, they also enjoy competition:

Normally, a teacher will hold training early in the morning during physical education period. Hence, we set the training at least once in a week. It will be extended for a few weeks prior to a tournament. (Rani [*Orang Asli*], 16 years old)

I have been participating in the competition yearly for the past three years. It was very exciting and there was no difference except the fact that the seniors are no longer in the school teams. Joining the team annually is absolutely an unforgettable experience. (Zaiful [*Cambodian*], 16 years old)

Schooling Community Engagement and Support

The researchers also found the minority students in this study also received support from schooling community. The schooling community is classmates and teachers. They have also received assistance in terms of equipment and support from the more senior players:

When entering the final lap, I heard a loud cheer from my other team members, shouting my name to support me. Upon reaching the finishing line, my friends were waiting there and they hugged and congratulated me for winning a medal for my school. (Wiwi [Cambodian], 13 years old)

The school authority gave me a pair of shoes and clothes for my running. I used those items while representing the state at the national level held in Sarawak. The school's concern indirectly made me feel that I was a part of the school's big family. (Apu [*Orang Asli*], 14 years old)

We join several training outside the school every evening. It is worthwhile because we train with those who are experienced and more senior. Training is based on adult-skilled methods. (Lim [Chinese], 17 years old)

Family Tradition, Legacy and Previous Experience

Interestingly, the researcher discovered that the minority students' participation in sports was due to family tradition and legacies. We found that their family members were once engaged in similar sports. It has motivated them to follow in their family members' footsteps. It is also interesting to see how their childhood experiences in sports have triggered them to participate:

I played the game due to encouragement from my elder sister. She was a superb volleyball player. Each time we played together, she would narrate her previous experiences about the game, especially in dealing with teammates from different ethnicities. Despite the fact that she is furthering studies in a local university, she still encourages me to play and she even bought me a pair of sports shoes because she really wants me to follow her footsteps; become excellent in volleyball. (Chia [Chinese], 17 years old)

Every evening, the villagers and I will play volleyball at the court. We feel a greater excitement when our friends who come from Johore and Kuala Lumpur join us to play. Furthermore, we could get to know them better and get closer. (Amin [Cambodian], 16 years old)

When I was a child, my village friends loved to play the game of chasing each other. It was so fun when I got the chance to chase my friend. There were times when we raced with each other to determine who was the fastest. When I entered school, I found that the chasing – based games was available and I took the opportunity to participate in the games and represented my school. (Riyan [*Orang Asli*], 13 years old)

Teachers' Role

The researchers have also found that teachers played an important role in generating the interest of minority students in sports. They found that teachers are concerned with their wellness and treated them fairly:

The teacher treated us with transparency and fairness. He did not differentiate us though he knew that we were new. Besides, he also stressed that discipline is a primary thing if our team were to succeed. We hope he will always be with us in the school team for the forthcoming session. (Ali [Rohingya], 14 years old)

In the morning of the competition, the teacher was busy ensuring the presence of all players at the tournament. We were then driven by several cars to the venue of competition. Upon reaching, we were instructed to proceed to the provided tents. He also asked us to do simple warm ups and informed us to get ready when our names are called to the venue of the game. During noon, we were given food for lunch. Usually, the menu was rice with fish or chicken. When the tournament ended, on the very same day, we were briefed by the teacher concerning the tournament prior to sending us home. (Atan [*Orang Asli*], 16 years old)

DISCUSSION

In an effort to explain the issues addressed in this paper, we have decided to choose Social Reproduction theory of Pierre Bourdieu. The theory stresses the importance of a *field* where social integration takes place. It also explains about the concept of *habitus* – the way of acting, thinking or feeling. In all circumstances in this study, we found the importance connections between capitals, habitus and social integration.

First of all, in relation to the training session and competition, we considered them as a *field* where social integration takes place. Indeed, training venues are the places where they act and think according to the needs of a team. The way of acting, thinking or feeling can be witnessed as they share ideas in problem solving and learn the dialects of their teammates. They accommodate and assimilate to the needs of their fellow friends in the teams. Secondly, we found the involvement of bonding capital is a process of social integration. The bonding capital is their fellow teammates as well as coaches. Therefore, the coaches, teachers and seniors in particular are seen as bonding capital that unites students from different ethnicities. They are seen as important agents of socialisation to the minority students who are involved in sports-based character school programme. It is due to the fact that they have imposed specific instructions on their students so that they can integrate among themselves effectively. Interestingly, we also noticed that attendance for training is important to the minority students. By attending training, they can learn new skills and get to know other teammates. Apart from that, we found that their regular training sessions with adults have made them more matured in terms of competence level compared to the other teams in the district of Pekan, Pahang. In this regard, the adult-sparring players are seen as bonding capital. In addition, we found that sports participation during competition among minority students has nurtured mutual cooperation. In relation to Bourdieu's theory, it emphasizes the importance of bonding capitals in order to achieve social integration.

In relation to family and community engagements, we found that they have a great influence that spurred minority students' participation in sports-based character school programme. Therefore, family members have given great impact on the minority students' participation in sports-based character school programme. Their forms of encouragement are seen via sharing of idea, motivation and gifts. Their stories and experiences to the younger siblings have prompted participation in sports activities. Their elder siblings have also stressed the importance of making friends with players from different ethnic groups. As the process occurs repeatedly, it supports the idea of *habitus*.

As a result of family engagement, it has triggered the process of social integration among minority students due to their elderly siblings' involvement and encouragement. The involvement of community is also important in spurring the sporting culture among minority students. Community, in the context of social capital is considered as a linking capital. Thus, sports is seen as a mechanism of integration among them although they live in different areas. Knowing their status as minority and far from their native land, they used the platform of

sports to unite with other friends. Thus, it shows that sports has been used as a medium of social integration. It is reflected in their way of acting, thinking or feeling (*habitus*) as a minority group. In a few cases, the minority students' participation in sports-based character school programme can be seen as a reflection of their childhood experience. As they learn to play since childhood, it required them to mix with peers. When they mix with others, they learn how other friends act, feel and think about them. Therefore, it is not difficult for them to participate in sports-based character school programme as they have experienced similar kinds of social integration during childhood. Interestingly, this study has also revealed that their involvement in sports began in their native land where they started to play sports. Consequently, this scenario has triggered them to join the school team. As a result, their engagement in sports occurred repeatedly and reflected in *habitus* – way of acting, thinking or feeling.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can simplify that sports-based character school programmes have benefited minority students. It has been an effective tool to achieve social integration among them, especially in a multi-ethnic environment in schools as revealed in this study. Four factors have been identified that triggered social integration. They are training sessions and competition, schooling community engagement and support, family tradition and legacies, and teacher's role. These four pull factors are essential in ensuring minority students' participation in sports-based character school programme. The concept of *habitus* – the way of acting, thinking or feeling is undoubtedly related to these four factors. As these all factors occur repeatedly, it involved the participation of bonding and linking capitals such as family, schools, peers and teachers. The engagement of these capitals and *habitus* are important as they lead to social integration among students of different ethnic groups in schools. This situation has cultivated the sense of respect and mutual understanding among them in line with the notion of 1Malaysia. At the administrative level, the MOE should assist schools in administering the character school programme. Additionally, the sports-based school character programme should be seen as a serious agenda in uniting students from different ethnic groups. Apart from creating the sporting images as school *ethos*, schools should plan the character school programme accordingly and systematically to ensure its effectiveness. Regardless of the obstacles and challenges that sports-based character school programme may encounter, school authorities must ensure that the objectives of the sports-based character school programme have been achieved.

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