Measuring youth civic development in Malaysia: Conceptualization, instrument development using the Rasch measurement model, and substantive outcomes

By

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University
2009
Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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Abstract

This study concerned the development of measures for youth civic development in Malaysia with four major goals in mind, namely conceptual, measurement, baseline/pragmatic, and predictive goals. It was a preliminary study of its kind in Malaysia as Malaysia did not participate in any international or regional study such as the IEA Civic Study. The central intention of the study was to establish a conceptually valid assessment framework and psychometrically sound instruments for the measurement of youth civic development in Malaysia. This would, in turn, provide some baseline information upon which future research on youth civic development in Malaysia could build.

Civics as a subject was removed from the Malaysian school curriculum in the early 1980s and Civic and Citizenship Education as a specific subject, with an explicit structure and curriculum framework, was reintroduced only in 2005. It was not feasible at the time when this study was conducted to conduct a specific assessment on the outcomes for school-aged students as explicated and expected in the curriculum framework. Therefore, the post-school-aged group of young undergraduates in public universities within the age range of 17-28 was selected as the target population.

Firstly, a conceptualisation of youth civic development was synthesized by identifying current views on citizenship, as set out in the international literature and, specifically, in Malaysia in two major documents – the Rukenagara and Vision2020. Civic development consists of three variables of Civic Knowledge (CK) (knowledge
about the legal status and associated rights and responsibilities of citizens); Civic Disposition (CD) (views on identity and attitudes as a citizen); and Civic Engagement (CE) (participation as a citizen). The relationship between civic development variables was explicated through a Neo-Vygotskian cultural-historical theory of human development. In addition, Bronfenbrenner’s Socio-Ecological Theory of human development was adopted for the selection of contextual and individual factors (the independent variables) for the conceptual model. To help ensure cross-cultural validity for use within the Malaysian socio-cultural context, the three dependent variables of CK, CD and CE, and the independent variables were appraised for their suitability for use within the Malaysian socio-cultural context before they were operationalized into observable indicators.

Secondly, the Rasch measurement paradigm, framework and model were adopted as the foundation for instrument development and validation. The procedures for instrument development followed Wilson’s model of four building blocks of instrument development (Wilson, 2005). Three instruments were developed for this study, namely The Malaysian Civic Knowledge Inventory (MCKI), The Malaysian Civic Disposition Inventory (MCDI), and the Malaysian Civic Engagement Inventory (MCEI). Items from existing instruments in international literature were adopted or adapted for the three instruments, especially the MCEI, if there was construct equivalence in Rukunegara and Vision 2020. This was to ensure a cumulative tradition in research on youth civic development. Most of the items in the MCKI and the MCDI however were developed specifically for this study to capture the specificity of the civic culture of Malaysia.

The target population for the study was undergraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. Students at one public university were chosen as the accessible population. Data were collected in February 2006 (pilot study) and from July to August 2006 (main study). The sample for this study (N=1391) was drawn through multistage cluster sampling by study concentration, level of study, and clusters based on lecture/tutorial group. The sample also, by default, included major inherent characteristics of the target population, particularly gender (Male and Female) and ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian and other ethnic groups).
Rasch analyses confirmed the three-dimensional structure of youth civic development. Three measurement scales with acceptable psychometric properties were established to provide measures for the three dependent variables of CK, CD and CE. The hypotheses about civic development (in terms of CK, CD and CE) as a ‘tool and result’ activity were tested through path analyses of mediational relationships based on Baron and Kenny’s criteria (1986) using the Rasch-derived linearized scores from the main study. Analyses provided statistical support for a bidirectional association between each pair of CK, CD and CE, despite the low inter-correlations between them.

This study revealed that, on average, youth in this study demonstrated a moderately high level of CK (Mean =1.11, SD = 0.77), a positive CD (Mean = 1.25; SD = 0.63) but a moderately low CE (Mean = -0.44; SD = 0.92). The Malay sub-sample scored, on average, higher on all three dimensions of civic development. The results of hierarchical multiple regressions however showed the effect of ethnicity (Malay or Non-Malay) was statistically non-significant when other contextual (home, curricular and co-curricular) variables were entered into the regression equation. This indicates it is not ethnicity that predicts levels of civic development, but rather it is the differences in other socio-political entitlements and status associated with ethnic status. Three selected collective social-contextual factors of home, curriculum and co-curriculum explained only a fairly modest but statistically significant amount of variance (10 to 20%) in the dependent variables.

Finally, the findings were discussed in relation to the theoretical perspectives undergirding this study. Pragmatic implications for policy planning as well as other relevant stakeholders involved in youth civic development are also discussed.
Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Professor David Andrich and Associate Professor Dr. Irene Styles for their dedication and commitment in supervising this project even after they left Murdoch University in 2007. It has been a privilege and a great honour to work under such knowledgeable and intuitive supervisors. Their expertise has greatly improved this dissertation.

I am also grateful to Associate Professor Dr. Renato Schibeci for taking up the role of on-site supervisor since July 2007 when both David and Irene had left Murdoch, in providing kind words of support and in many administrative procedures.

The financial support of Universiti Utara Malaysia for my first year of PhD studies and Murdoch University International Postgraduate Research Scholarship and Murdoch University Research Studentship from 2006 to 2008, are also acknowledged.

My sincere appreciation is extended to Dr. Laura Perry and Dr. Andrew McConney from School of Education, Murdoch University, for your kind support and encouragement. You have enriched my journey of PhD through your EDU 701 Paradigms of Social and Educational Research and EDU 739 Research Methods 2B (Multivariate Statistical Analyses for Educational Research).

My enormous thanks also go to the administrative staff, particularly staff from ERAP office (Angelina, Refat, Vivien and Lisa) as well as Alison and Bronwyn from the Dean’s office for providing me a supportive environment in which to work. Thank you also to Margaret Luck for proofreading and formatting this dissertation.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my dearest husband, Jeffery Ng, whose love, sacrifice and support allowed me to pursue my dream; and to my three lovely daughters, Joanna, Juliana and Jessica, for your unrelenting love, patience and understanding throughout the duration of my involvement in this project.
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