

AS Thaipusam approached this year, as a teacher, I found myself reflecting on how learning does not begin and end in textbooks. Some of the most powerful lessons walk past our school gates every year, carried in processions, prayers, and lived traditions.

In a multicultural society like Malaysia, diversity should not be treated as a decorative add-on to the curriculum or reduced to colourful festivals on a calendar. Thaipusam offered a valuable opportunity to move beyond surface level tolerance towards genuine understanding. When students of different faiths learn what ritual symbolises and how faiths other than their own shape ethical discipline and resilience, they begin to see religions other than their own not as “the other” but as a lived moral framework that deserves respect.

Rethinking multicultural learning through festivals

Curriculum wise, festivals fit naturally across several subjects. In Moral Education, it can be used to draw parallels between universal values such as patience, sacrifice, self-control and gratitude, allowing students to recognise shared ethical foundations across faiths. In History, it can be contextualised within Malaysia, highlighting migration, identity, and cultural continuity. Geography and Civics can explore how religious celebrations shape public spaces, community relations, and social harmony. Even language subjects can invite reflective writing, interviews, or narrative

accounts that develop empathy through voice and perspective.

More importantly, how we teach our students about festivals matters more than where the subject is placed. Learning about festivals should prioritise dialogue, inquiry, and reflection, not memorisation. Inviting students to ask respectful questions, analyse symbols, or reflect on similarities with their own traditions nurtures critical multicultural literacy rather than tokenism.

If schools shy away from engaging with real cultural practices, we risk raising students who know diversity as a slogan but

not as a lived reality.

Festivals remind us that curriculum is not neutral; it either bridges understanding or reinforces distance. As educators, our task is not to dilute differences, but to help students encounter them with curiosity, humility, and intellectual honesty. In doing so, multiculturalism moves from policy rhetoric into meaningful classroom practice.

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