

## **Intercultural Communication among Non-Chinese in National-Type Chinese Schools: Parents Perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chinese education has been rooted in Malaysia as early as 1849. This paper explores the non-Chinese parents' perspectives on intercultural communication among their children who were enrolled in National-Type Chinese Schools in Kelantan. A group of non-Chinese parents whom their children attended the schools, were interviewed. The data were analysed thematically. Results indicated that non-Chinese parents believed that the non-Chinese students were involved actively in communicating and interacting interculturally. The non-Chinese students' intercultural communication was apparent from their activities and comments from parents. This paper suggested fine-tuning the quality of teaching and learning behaviour or ethical standards that helps both educators and students to gain more in a multicultural educational setting. Nevertheless, future work should extend beyond the current scope of merely understanding parents' narratives of intercultural communication. It is recommended that future study includes the observations of the students' multicultural life outside of classroom setting.

**Keywords:** Multicultural; Intercultural Communication; National-Type Chinese Schools; Mandarin

### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of students joining the National Type Chinese schools has increased year by year. The history of the establishment of the National-Type Chinese School dated back to the British colonial period as Chinese vernacular school (Teen et. al., 2019). However, after the independence of Malaysia, the Chinese vernacular school, which was then governed by the local government, changed its name to National-Type Chinese School.

It was reported in the newspaper *The Star*, a statement from the education minister Dr Mohd Radzi Md Jidin that the enrolment of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools had seen an increase for the past 10 years. It was further reported that there was an increase of 5.83% among Malay students enrolled in National-Type Chinese Schools since

the year 2010 to 2020, an increase of 1.08% for Indian students and 0.65% increase for other races for the same period of 10 years.

There are various factors that contribute to the increasing numbers of non-Chinese students in the National-Type Chinese Schools. Past studies mentioned that some non-Chinese parents send their children to National-Type Chinese School. This is further supported by Santhiram (1999) that parents play important role in deciding schools for their children. Julia (2011) in her study found that the deciding factors among non-Chinese parents to send their children to National-Type Chinese Schools are, parents believe that it would be an advantage for their kids to learn different culture and believe that the Chinese is among ethnics that is always being associated with being diligent in study. Parents also believe that their children will be able to learn and get acculturated with the business minded people like the Chinese. They also believe that by learning Mandarin and assimilate with the Chinese would provide better job opportunity for their children since China is dominating the world economy and the ability to converse in Mandarin would be an advantage for their children.

Since the number of non-Chinese students has increased quite rapidly, it is important to understand and explore the intercultural communication of the school ecology which includes the teachers, administrative staff, students—Chinese and non-Chinese. The intercultural interaction among these different groups of the school community would affect the students especially the non-Chinese students who might have difficulties to interact in Mandarin or any Chinese dialect used in schools. This situation also indicates that the education system at the National-Type Chinese Schools could provide more multicultural approach to suit the increasing number of non-Chinese students attending the schools.

The increasing percentage of the number of non-Chinese students in these schools, indicate that the schools have been gaining popularity. Therefore, it is important to explore and understand the intercultural communication of non-Chinese students in the schools but from the lenses of parents. This is because, it is essential for the parents and school administration to understand the intercultural interaction of the non-Chinese students, so that the parents would be able to prepare their children and students to interact and learn better at the schools.

This study intends to explore and investigate the intercultural communication of the non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools and to explore the perspective of non-Chinese parents on the intercultural communication of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools. Therefore, this research aims to explore the following research questions: i) What is the intercultural communication of non-Chinese students in the National-Type Chinese Schools?; and ii) What is the non-Chinese parents' perspective of non-Chinese students' intercultural communication?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **National-Type Chinese Schools/Vernacular Schools**

Malaysia is one of Southeast Asia's multi-ethnic, multi-culture, and multi-religious countries. The diverse ethnicities and cultures in Malaysia resulted from the British colonialism. The British introduced a policy that separated the major ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians, which then resulted to racial polarization (Radzlan, Rosnon & Shaari, 2020). Malaysia is a classic example of ethnic coexistence with separate identities, with the state employing a wide range of preferential policies to address ethnic issues (Haque, 2003). According to Segawa (2013), Malaysia has a political framework that is based on ethnic politics. Indeed, due to the Malaysia's ethnic politics, ethnic preferential policies influenced most aspects of the country, including social, political, and economic realms, particularly Chinese schooling in Malaysia.

The beginnings of Chinese education in Malaysia can be traced to the early nineteenth century. There were three Chinese schools in Malacca by 1815 (Florence, 2015). One was founded by the London Missionary Society (Florence, 2015). With regards to the other two, sociologist Yang Qinghuang suggests that “at least one would be a school founded by the Hokkien people” (Florence, 2015). Scholar Zheng Liangshu suggests that some old-type Chinese schools might have existed in the Straits Settlements since the end of the eighteenth century (Florence, 2015).

The establishment of National-Type Chinese Schools has been through a long journey dated back to the British colonial period before the independence of Malaysia (Teen et. al., 2019). The development of Chinese education in Malaysia has a long history since the large scale of immigration of Chinese to Malaya beginning in the nineteenth century (Raman & Sua, 2015; Nan, Yanan & Yok, 2018). It has been almost 200 years since Wufu Shuyuan, which was the first Chinese school in Malaysia established in Penang in 1819 (Curdt-Christiansen & Hancock, 2014). In Malaysia, Chinese education in Malaysia began with private schools. At that time, a large number of Chinese immigrants came to Malaya as indentured laborers in the late nineteenth century (Nan, Yanan & Yok, 2018).

The enrolment of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools in Malaysia has seen a steady increase over the past 10 years. This increase has been influenced by many factors as described in past studies. The enrolment of non-Chinese students in the schools is mainly due to the decision made by the parents; as the decision maker for their children education (Santhiram, 1999). There are also several reasons that result of the parents’ decision of enrolling their children in the mentioned schools.

A study done by Julia Tan (2011) found several factors that contribute to the enrolment of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools. Among which is due to the current world economy. China is among the dominating countries when it comes to the world economy and trade. Therefore, educating the children in the context that would require them to learn and interact in Mandarin would be an added value to the children future and job opportunities. The study also found that parents believe their children will be able to assimilate and practice the hardworking culture of the Chinese. This is because it is believed that the Chinese ethnic is among ethnic that is hardworking and diligent. Besides, the opportunity to acculturate with the Chinese who are always associated with being business minded, would be an advantage to the non-Chinese students.

The increasing number of non-Chinese students in the schools also indicate that the interaction and the school ecology is becoming more intercultural.

### **Intercultural Communication**

Past studies that explore non-Chinese students in national-type schools were investigating the ethnic relationship and factors that influence non-Chinese parents to enrol their children in National-Type Chinese Schools (Sua, Ngah & Darit, 2013; Ang & Ahmad, 2016; Lee, Ting & Lo, 2017; Tan & Ngu, 2017; Teen et. al., 2019). However past studies did not explore the intercultural communication or interaction of the non-Chinese students from the perspective of the non-Chinese parents and the school administration.

There are numerous studies that explore the intercultural communication aspects of students of various cultures in the Malaysian context. However, most past studies were conducted in higher education institutions in Malaysia. For example, intercultural communication aspect of Malaysian students studying in foreign countries (Straffon, 2003), undergraduates in public and private universities (Tamam, 2010, 2012; Tamam & Abdullah, 2012; Shah et. al., 2014; Tamam & Krauss, 2017).

It is essential to understand the intercultural interaction of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools because each culture has its own unique sets of practices,

values and beliefs and misunderstanding or misperceptions might happen due to the differences (Md Zabid & Ho, 2003; Jenifer & Raman, 2015). Also, being able to communicate effectively in an intercultural setting is essential as according to Lustig and Koester (2010) interaction involves people interacting in a setting that depicts a large cultural difference, therefore it is important to effectively understand and interpret the differences.

This notion is also supported by Philipsen (2002) in which he commented that intercultural communication includes understanding one's culture and demonstration behaviour that is acceptable to the people of the culture at any given times and situation.

Therefore, given the understanding of depiction of intercultural communication from the prominent scholars in the field, it is the concern of the researchers to explore the non-Chinese parents' and school administration on the aspects of intercultural communication of the non-Chinese students in the school. The perception of non-Chinese parents and the school administration on this aspects would be able to provide insights to the researchers as well as the stakeholders—non-Chinese parents and the school administration, of mechanisms to prepare the non-Chinese students to socialise, learn and interact interculturally more effectively.

## **METHOD**

To examine the perspective of non-Chinese parents of the non-Chinese students' intercultural communication, this study used a qualitative approach by interviewing the non-Chinese parents. Qualitative approach ensures in-depth understanding of various issues and topics (Crowe et. al., 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

### **Research Context and Participants**

#### *Context and location*

Participants of this study were chosen randomly among Malay parents who sent their children to Chinese national-type primary schools (SJKC) in Kelantan. These schools were SJKC Chung Hwa, SJKC Chung Cheng, SJKC Peir Chih which were located in Kota Bharu (capital state of Kelantan), SJKC Chung Hwa located in Temangan, SJKC Pei Hwa, SJKC Poey Sit in Machang district, SJKC Khay Boon in Rantau Panjang, SJKC Yok Eng, SJKC Poy Hwa in the district of Pasir Mas, SJKC Kai Chih in Pasir Puteh, SJKC Yuk Cheng in Tanah Merah, SJKC Yuk Tze, Tumpat, SJKC Yuk Chai, Kuala Krai, SJKC Gua Musang and SJKC Kampung Pulau in Gua Musang.

#### *Participants*

The participants involved were 10 Malay parents who sent their children to Chinese national-type primary schools (SJKC) in Kelantan. The participant selection was done by purposive sampling in which only parents of Malay students were selected with the help from the classroom teacher. Later, 10 parents were randomly selected from the list.

### **Data Generation**

In generating the data, qualitative technique was employed by conducting in-depth interviews with the non-Chinese parents whose children enrolled in Chinese schools. In-depth interview is among the widely used data collection technique in qualitative research (Ritchie et. al., 2013).

#### *In-Depth Interviews*

In-depth interviews were implemented to explore how non-Chinese parents managed and viewed their children in terms of intercultural communication context in Chinese school.

Participants shared their perceptions, feelings and reflections about their view on the intercultural communication skills that they expected their children to gain from studying in Chinese school, for instance, the ability to adapt to different cultures. They were also asked to provide any new experience that their children gained in the Chinese school when they interact with their friends from different races. Besides, the interviews were implemented to explore how administration manages the Non-Chinese students in terms of intercultural communication context in Chinese school (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

The data from the in-depth interviews were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is a widely used analytical approach in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes in a data set represent some patterned responses in relation to the research questions. The results of a thematic analysis will give emphasis to the most important meanings present within the data (Joffe, 2012). The interview responses were transcribed and coded to find the main themes. Once the main themes were decided, the data were discussed in comparison to findings from past studies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study found two major themes from the data collected. The intercultural communication of the non-Chinese students from the perspective of the non-Chinese parents was divided to two different themes which were, 1) the students developed their intercultural communication skills by socialising in Mandarin with the peers at school and the Chinese community around them, and 2) the intercultural communication of the non-Chinese parents was reflected through their academic performance and school environment.

### **Socialising in Mandarin**

The data found the non-Chinese parents expected their children to be able to interact and socialize with the other Chinese students and the school community in general. A father named Ibrahim commented that his daughter interacted with the other Chinese students at school and the community at large.

*Anak saya dapat bergaul dengan masyarakat Cina dan Siam di SJK(C).*

He believed that the opportunity to study at National-Type Chinese School provided better opportunity for his daughter to socialize and interact in an intercultural setting.

Another parent, Fadilah mentioned that she was initially reluctant to enroll her children in the National-Type Chinese Schools. She mentioned that it was her husband's idea to send their children to the school.

*Suami saya tetap nak hantar anak-anak ke sekolah Cina walaupun saya tidak setuju pada mulanya. Saya rasa tak perlu. Tapi suami saya berasa kalau belajar di sekolah Cina, mereka juga dapat berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Cina. Sekarang, saya bersetuju dengan pendapat suami saya. Anak-anak saya semua boleh berbahasa Cina sekarang.*

Fadilah eventually agreed with the decision and she was happy that now her children were able to interact well in Mandarin.

Another parents: Mohd Zin dan Wan Salwiah expressed similar comments.

*Saya rasa belajar di sekolah Cina dapat membentuk jati diri anak-anak saya...Saya lihat anak-anak saya confident tinggi sikit (lebih berkeyakinan) semasa bergaul dengan orang lain...dengan aunty (makcik) di pasar...tidak kolot dan tidak kekok macam orang luar bandar...kami tinggal di luar bandar, jadi saya mahu bagi yang lebih baik untuk anak saya...tapi tak cukup...jadi saya hantar anak saya ke SJK(C)...nampaknya anak saya boleh berdikari...*

They commented that their children could speak in Mandarin and seem to be more confident to interact with the local community. The parents believed that their children had benefited from the intercultural interaction they experience at school in which that the students were found to be friend with the Chinese students without any racial judgement. The mother also added that:

*Anak sulung saya baik dengan kawan-kawan Cina di sekolah. Kawan kelasnya akan datang ke rumah ambil dia dan hantar dia balik jika nak jemput dia pergi ke jamuan harijadi...Apabila saya rancang nak tukarkan dia ke SK ketika dia berada di tahun 4, dia tidak mahu pergi kerana tak sanggup tinggalkan kawan-kawannya di sekolah sekarang...*

This comment indicates the relationship between their children and the other Chinese students. A good rapport demonstrated that the non-Chinese students interacted well interculturally. The intercultural interaction and communication of the non-Chinese students was apparent when the parents commented of the students' social interaction with their Chinese friends at schools and with the Chinese community.

The study found that the non-Chinese parents believed that their children were able to interact and socialize with the local community at schools as well as the local Chinese community well. The findings also indicated that the non-Chinese students were actively involved in the intercultural setting within and outside the school environment. This situation also demonstrated that the school's environment was positive and supportive of the non-Chinese students to use the language to communicate outside the school compound and to maintain the relationship with their schoolmates.

A study done by Teen, et. al., (2019) found two factors that contributed to the increase of enrollment of non-Chinese students in the National-Type Chinese Schools. They found that among the factors that motivated the non-Chinese parents to send their children to the National-Type Chinese School were the quality and diversity factors in the National-Type Chinese School, the ecological environment factors as well as the importance of mastering the Chinese language in the era of globalization (Teen et. al., 2019). However, there was a willingness among the Malay students to interact with the Chinese students through task related activities, indicating that the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships needed to be guided by a convergence of interests (Sua et. al., 2013).

According to Ngien and Ching (2016), the reasons that motivated the non-Chinese students studying at National-Type Chinese School from the perspective of non-Chinese parents differed from those of non-Chinese students themselves. From the parents' perspectives, they wanted their children to learn Chinese for future career chances, which is similar to the findings of this current study. Previous research is consistent with the findings of the current study.

However, for the non-Chinese students, studying the Chinese language does not have to be directly influenced their future, as they believed that studying it will allow them to communicate with the Chinese community around them. According to Ngien and Ching

(2016), 70% of non-Chinese parents send their children to National-Type Chinese School to further their tertiary education. Students of non-Chinese parents believed that if their children could communicate with the Chinese community after studying the Chinese language, it would benefit their children regardless of future profession or business opportunities.

One aspect of intercultural communication is the ability to interact appropriately and effectively with people of different culturally and linguistically (Sinicrope et. al., 2007). As in the context of this study, although the setting is a National-Type Chinese School, where the majority of the students are Chinese, the non-Chinese students were able to experience the intercultural interaction within the classroom learning environment and also outside of the school environment. The findings also indicated that the setting of the school is becoming more intercultural with the increasing number of non-Chinese students attending the school.

### **Academic Performance and School Environment**

Another theme that is evident from the findings is the non-Chinese students' academic performance and school environment which also resulted from their intercultural interaction and communication at schools with their Chinese friends, teachers and the whole school community.

One parent; Zainun complimented on the school's service provided by the school teachers and administrative staff.

*Sistem pentadbiran dan pengajaran di SJK(C) dikatakan boleh dihormati. Jika berlaku apa-apa hal, boleh berhubung terus dengan Guru Besar...PIBG juga boleh berbincang dalam mesyuarat...dan...guru-guru adalah baik...mereka lebih baik, prihatin, memberi banyak kerja rumah...tiada masa terluang bagi budak-budak merayau-rayau atau bermain sahaja pada musim cuti sekolah...mereka tak bagi buang masa...di SK, rasa tak sebanyak kerja rumah...selain itu, saya lihat sentiasa ada kemajuan di sekolah Cina...pemikiran budak menjadi lebih tajam...*

She mentioned that it was easy for her to communicate with the teachers and the school administrative staff regarding her children. She further commented that the students were occupied with schoolwork thus lessen the probability of the students to waste time. The dedication showed by the teachers and the school administration indicated that the non-Chinese students at the schools interacted with the school community in which they were not left behind. According to Tan et. al., (2013), school efficiency is a crucial determinant in Malay parents' choice of National-Type Chinese Schools. The survey discovered that Malay parents who sent their children to National-Type Chinese School had high expectations for their children's learning and academic progress. They believed that the high levels of discipline in the National-Type Chinese School contributed to good student academic accomplishment. The findings of this current study were consistent with the findings from Tan's study.

Another parent, Diana also agreed that the school environment, teaching and learning process at schools were encouraging and supportive.

*Kami suka kepada iklim persekolahan, budaya kerja serta P&P (Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran) di SJK(C)...*

Her comment demonstrated that she was pleased with the overall environment at the school. The development of students' characters and attitudes at a young age will tend to focus on the microenvironment. Students' behaviours will develop in a negative or positive way depending on the support and the environment the microsystem provides. In the context of early childhood education institutions, there are elements of the school curriculum that can provide an environment that contributes to the positive development of students (Teen et al. 2019). As a result, efforts to implement systematic, disciplined, and multicultural National-Type Chinese School education can be associated to the development of student's characters and attitudes by creating a safe, comfortable, and exciting environment for students' development at a young age.

Wan Salwiah who also enrolled her children to the National-Type Chinese School attested to the comments made by previous parents.

*Guru-guru sekolah ini bagus...Mereka tidak pilih kasih semasa mengajar...sesiapa pun turut didenda jika tak buat kerja rumah...ini bagus sebagai sedikit tekanan kepada budak-budak...mereka juga jaga betul-betul budak Melayu yang tidak dapat ikut...Ada guru yang beri tuisyen secara sukarela selepas waktu sekolah...Kalau anak saya menghadapi masalah dalam pembelajaran, saya akan pergi berjumpa dengan guru kelasnya dan bincang dengannya...*

She commented that the teachers and school administration practiced fair treatment to all students especially regarding any disciplinary actions. She also praised the school initiative in giving extra attention to non-Chinese students, especially to those who were less proficient in Mandarin. Some teachers were willing to give extra class to the students, voluntarily. Reviews on early classroom environment studies revealed that there were associations between students' perceptions of their classroom learning environments and their cognitive and affective learning outcomes (Fraser, 1994). Associations between learning outcomes and students' perceptions of classroom learning environments were found in Chemistry classes (Fraser & McRobbie, 1995), in Biology classes (Fisher, Henderson, & Fraser, 1997) and in Mathematics classes (Fisher, Fraser, & Rickards, 1997) for Australian students. Chua, Wong and Chen (2009) found that students' perception of their Chinese Language classroom learning environment was related to their motivation to learn the language. The literature reviews provided solid support for the investigation of grade-8 students' perceptions of their Mandarin classroom learning environment and its relationship to students' motivation to learn Mandarin. Therefore, the environment and support system from teachers and schools is very important in terms of student learning and teaching.

The findings indicated that the non-Chinese students' intercultural interaction was supported by the teachers and school administration. The support from teachers and the school administration provided opportunities and positive intercultural interaction for the non-Chinese students. It is essential for the interactants to be given the support and opportunity to engage in positive and meaningful interethnic interaction and engagement (Tamam & Hashmi, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Because of the positive response of non-Chinese parents in Malaysia, National-Type Chinese Schools are becoming increasingly essential in the role of pluralistic education in meeting the demands of ethnically different students. It was evident from the findings that most non-Chinese parents enrolled their children to National-Type Chinese Schools for few purposes as they believed that their children will be able to communicate in Mandarin and able to



communicate with the Chinese community at school and local Chinese community. The benefits of being able to communicate interculturally provides better job opportunity to the students. Besides of learning a foreign language Mandarin, the school environment and support system to the non-Chinese students were among the contributing factor to the increased enrolment of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools. Our country should celebrate diversity and makes it one of our strengths and inculcate the culture as a multilingual community.

This study also found that non-Chinese parents believed that the non-Chinese students were involved actively in communicating and interacting interculturally. The non-Chinese students' intercultural communication was apparent from their activities and comments from parents. It is also suggested that, due to the increasing number of enrolment of non-Chinese students in National-Type Chinese Schools, the schools to refine their teaching and learning approach so that the teaching and learning process would be more appropriate and suitable for multicultural context.

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