

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION: INTERACTION AMONG CHILDREN FROM CROSS-ETHNIC GROUPS IN A MULTI-ETHNIC PRE-SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study was to better understand how children from three different ethnic groups relate to each other in a pre-school by investigating the children's relationships across three cultures. The study involved 25 children from one PERPADUAN Pre-school which comprised children from different ethnicities and is situated in an urban area. Naturalistic observations of the children based on classroom activities and free play were conducted over 12 weeks and were recorded through field notes and digital camera to gain understanding of the children's behaviour. The children were interviewed based on observations and photographs conducted earlier. The findings in this study revealed friendships and peer networks occurring among the ethnic groups. Children from different ethnic groups shared common objects among themselves especially during the learning period. There was obviously developed reciprocity and interrelations between them. Children related to each other through play activities and the use of language; they learned Malay because the social relationship were being developed across language groups using a language familiar to all. Based on the evidences, a model of multi-ethnic pre-school children's friendship networks was developed from the data of this study.

Keywords: culturally responsive, pre-school education, cross-ethnic groups, multi-ethnic pre-school

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Malaysia is confronting increased criticism from the division of public education at the primary level into national and national-type schools. The national schools are attended by the Malays while the Chinese and Indians would prefer to attend the national-type schools. This is allegedly creating racial polarisation at an early age, as national schools are Malay-dominated and, especially in recent years, have an overwhelmingly Muslim population (Rais Yatim, Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, The Sun, 2009). This could lead to children who find it difficult to establish friendships and get along with fellow pupils from diverse backgrounds. In line with this, the multi-ethnic pre-school nurtures a spirit of harmony, neighbourliness, unity, and nationality among children from different races which may contribute to racial integration. As stated in the circulation letter from the Department of National Unity and Integration, one of the criteria of Multi-ethnic (PERPADUAN Pre-school) is the recruitment of not less than 20 children, if possible, from multi-ethnic backgrounds. This is to provide opportunities for the children to understand and develop the social values of the three ethnic groups and the practices of commonality based on Malaysian culture. In order to understand the impact of ethnicity on children's behaviour and cross-ethnic relationships, we have reviewed the literature in line with this study. The study of cross-ethnic relationships in a multi-ethnic pre-school is important for the improvement of intergroup relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi-ethnic pre-school refers to “pre-school that includes children of different ethnic groups, which is the policy of the pre-school itself to ensure the composition of the pre-school entrants consist of mix of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others. The aim of the multi-ethnic pre-school is to unite three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysian in order to ensure national integration” (Majzub, 2006, p. 87). According to Feddes, Noack, & Rutland (2009) multi-ethnic schools and the tolerant nature of such schools influence positive interethnic friendships. Longitudinal results show that cross-ethnic friendships positively affected children’s intergroup attitudes. Longitudinal, direct and extended cross-ethnic friendship effects on out-group evaluations among German (majority status, N=76) and Turkish (minority status, N=73) children (age 7-11 years) in ethnically heterogeneous elementary schools were examined at the beginning and end of the school year. The findings demonstrated that direct cross-ethnic friendship is more effective in changing children’s intergroup attitudes compared to extended cross-ethnic friendship. However, this was evident among ethnic majority but not ethnic minority status children.

Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy (2003) found intergroup contact and friendship were keystones to the reduction of prejudice. Based on various indices of peer relations (interactive companions, mutual friendships, and the stability and perceived qualities of mutual friends) for elementary school students who differed in grade, gender, and racial background, they explored whether racial attitudes were associated with befriending or avoiding classmates. Their findings showed cross-race mutual friendships declined with grade and among fifth-graders were less likely to show 6-month stability than same-race friendships. Finally, racial prejudice was most strongly related to the number of excluded classmates, while children with less biased attitudes had more cross-race interactive companions and more positive perceptions of their friends. Therefore, friendships may be presumed to be one mechanism for the maintenance of sustained contact and reduction of prejudice.

Multi-ethnic schools increase the opportunity for cross-race friendships. Aboud and Levy (2000) suggest that ethnic friendships may be optimal dyads that provide certain levels of intimate exchange, cooperation between friends from different ethnic backgrounds; and may encourage the development of awareness of or sensitivity to other ethnicities. These evidently are vital to the establishment and maintenance of ethnic friendships in the context of mutual ethnic acceptance and tolerance. Research examined same and cross-race friendships of blacks and whites as the proportion of minority group (white or black) students increased in a classroom, majority group students were more likely to befriend them (Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987). However, only a few studies have actually measured interracial friendships. Even fewer have been carried out with children.

According to Kawabata & Crick (2008), children who formed cross-ethnic friendships were more likely to be viewed by teachers as relationally inclusive and possessing leadership skills. The frequency and correlation of cross-racial/ethnic friendships were examined in a sample consisting of 509 (188 African American, 135 European American, 106 Asian American, and 80 Latino) children in 4th grade from 39 classrooms in several public elementary schools in United States. The result showed that children of all ethnicities did have cross-ethnic and same ethnic friendships; however, the number of cross-ethnic friendships differed across ethnicities. For instance, European-American children displayed a higher frequency of cross-ethnic friendships than African-American children. Moreover, Latino children displayed a lower frequency of these friendships, compared with the average of all other groups. One possibility is that African-American and Latino children, on average, tend to be more

family- or community-oriented (DuBois & Hirsch, 1990). Children from different cultures may make friends with peers outside school, such as in the neighbourhood or with relatives (Kawabata & Crick, 2008).

The behavioural styles of children belonging to different racial and ethnic groups may influence not only interactions but also peer preferences and peer relationships. Young children adopt patterns of behaviour along with social rules and values from their families and communities (Ramsey, 1995). This is supported by Feddes, Noack, & Rutland (2009), who found that direct and extended contact promoted more positive social norms regarding cross-ethnic friendships, which then resulted in improved out-group attitudes among majority children. It appears that social norms about cross-ethnic friendships are an important mediator of the friendship attitude relationship among majority children. Their study focused on *injunctive* norms, that is, children's perceptions of whether other German and Turkish children think it is normal to have an out-group friend. It is possible that cross-racial/ethnic friendships, whereby the child builds up advanced social competence and prosocial behaviour, are particularly beneficial (Aboud & Levy, 2000). Reciprocated cross-ethnic friendships have also been found to promote prosocial behaviour. However, Kawabata & Crick (2008) argued that cross-ethnic friendships are uncommon and relatively fragile. The literature suggests that ethnicity is one of the major divides in social interactions.

There is very little research on the influence of race and ethnicity on different aspects of friendships between children. First, we know little about whether race and ethnicity affect some facets (e.g. intimacy, competition) more than others, or influence some in different ways to others. Second, the interrelationships between developmental changes in children's understanding of ethnicity and race and children's inter-racial and inter-ethnic friendships are not understood. Third, there has been little attention paid to whether ethnicity influences changes within friendships, despite evidence that the factors that influence the initiation of relationships may differ from those that maintain them and how ethnicity affect friendship.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

There is a need to investigate whether closer contact between members of different ethnic groups promotes more positive racial attitudes. The purpose of this study is to examine how children from three different ethnic groups relate to each other in a pre-school.

This research explores multiculturalism in families with culturally diverse backgrounds and in the institution where children have their first formal contact with others. It deals with children's social interaction with others at pre-school level.

This study seeks to answer the following question:

1. How do children from the three different ethnic groups relate to each other in a pre-school?

METHODOLOGY

Most studies of children's behaviour have used research methodologies centred on attitude testing, behavioural checklists, or modest field experiments. This study used a qualitative research method, including observations and interviews. Observation techniques were applied to the children and then semi-structured interviews were held with the children and teachers.

Ethnography

The framework for the conduct of this research includes observation, field notes, talks, interviews and documents that form the basis for ethnographic research. This study aims to describe and analyse the practices and beliefs of cultures in pre-school. Since the study involved detailed qualitative research on children's social behaviour, it was impossible to cover all the PERPADUAN Pre-schools in depth within the 14-week period of study spent in Malaysia for the collection of data. We chose one PERPADUAN Pre-school for data collection and observed about 25 children. In order to cover in-depth data, we worked in PERPADUAN Pre-school every day for 14 weeks. Ethnography involves long term commitment from the researcher. We were there every day for 14 weeks building up a picture of human behaviour, working on getting to know the children and getting to know the setting so we were able to build up a 'thick description' of the setting and children's behaviour.

Observation

In this study, every child was observed within a 14-week period for a total of 3 to 5 times for each child. The observation required a sufficient number of observation sessions in order to achieve 'saturation point' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002), that is, for it to become evident that any additional sessions would be simply repeating. The saturation point consisted of three to five sessions, depending on each child. We spent about 10 to 20 minutes per session. The series of observations promoted the development of confidence and trust between the researcher and the respondents (children). During our observation sessions, we were able to assess the consistency of children's moods and behaviour at different times. We could simply watch individuals act and speak and this enabled us to collect data first hand, thereby preventing contamination of the factors, such as standing between the researcher and the object of research. After observation we spoke to the children and asked them about their own behaviour and actions.

Based on our observations, we found it quite difficult to see through the detailed information about the relationships of children in this kindergarten. This continued until we had to observe in detail the social acts shown by the children. Some of the social behaviours included helpful, cooperative, respectful, sharing and positive responses by children when they interacted with their friends. Based on these indicators, we compared them with the results of the interviews with the children. The interviews with children provided a new challenge for us, as the answers were similar in terms of the language used; for example, the terms "friend" and "love" are normal to children. As such, we tried to see the various aspects based on signs of the relationship of children in the actual context.

All the data from photographs, field notes (observations), and interview transcripts were written into words and after that we organized main ideas into concepts, categories and themes. We first started coding the photographs, field notes (observations) and interview transcripts manually before using the NVivo analysis to locate categories and properties. NVivo enabled us to reflect on the analytical process, develop ideas, and identify emerging themes as the data was coded. After codes and categories had been derived from the text, the patterns were compared across interview transcripts. This started with open coding, then clustering codes into families of concepts or categories, and finally capturing emergent themes from the clusters of codes. These were created and refined in order to capture helpful concepts linking thematic material in order to make an attempt at final thematic conceptualisation

analysis. The themes were arranged hierarchically into major themes and minor themes. These themes were cross-checked and verified with the help of NVivo.

The Location

One TABIKA PERPADUAN Negara (National Unity Pre-school) in Malaysia was used for this research. Every PERPADUAN pre-school has three ethnic components in class. The pre-school chosen was in an urban area (TABIKA PERPADUAN, in Kuala Lumpur). This pre-school was selected because of its multi-ethnic proportions. Children were from three ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Sampling

For the sampling, we observed and interviewed the children (n=25), and the teacher and assistant (n=2). The total number of children in one class was 25. For selection of the children, we selected 25 children in one pre-school class. They belonged to different ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. All children were chosen as respondents regardless of their age (5 – 6 years) and ethnicity. For the purpose of interview, as the study progressed, we made certain selections of common behaviour based on the children's behaviour and decided to focus on the views of children.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study showed that there were two patterns of friendship. First, emerging from this study, pre-schoolers were more likely to have several short-term friendships and peer interactions. A pattern which existed in this group would most likely occur in classroom activities and in group seating. An interaction was accommodated with social behaviours that were coordinated within dyads to produce interactions. It also involved objects that stimulated the interaction. It has been demonstrated that pre-school friendship dyads engage in more positive exchanges, mutuality, and sharing than do non-friend dyads. Second, close friendships which were more stable and maintained friendships were more likely to occur in classroom activities, shared play, free time and during outdoor activity. We have observed that to maintain relationships, close friendship involved shared play and emotional attachment, for example, between Canny and Ellin (refer to Figure 1.1).

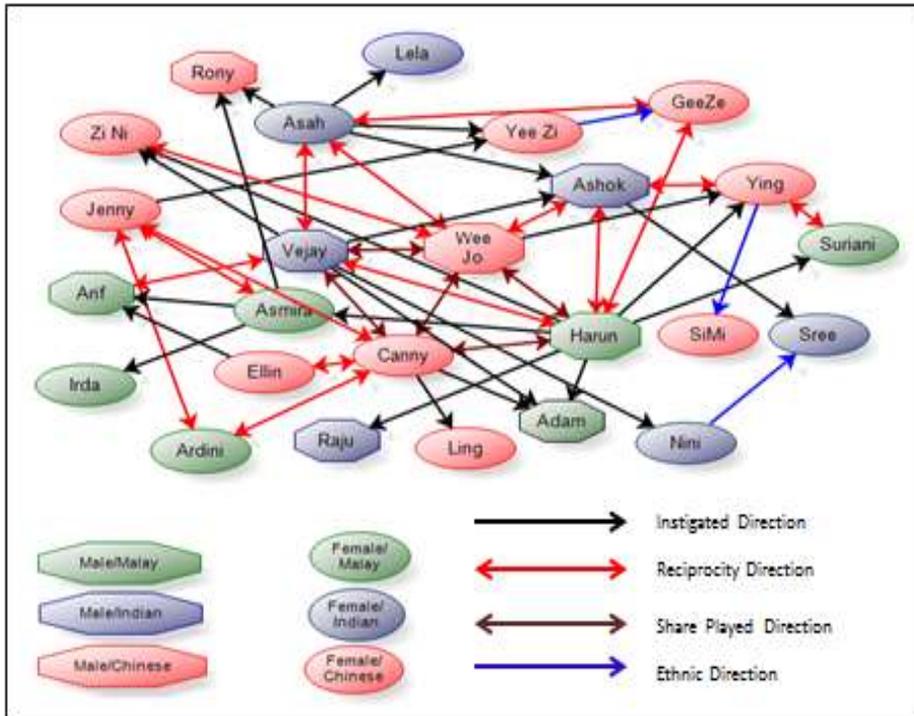


Figure 1.1: Pre-school children's friendship networks

Figure 1.1 maps the direction of children's friendship networks between the children in our study. The network was developed from the observations, photographs and interviews with children. A shape is used as a symbol for gender and a colour as a symbol for the ethnic groups (i.e. green for Malay, blue for Indian and red for Chinese). Meanwhile, coloured arrows show the patterns of direction relationships (blue for ethnic direction, one-way black arrow for instigated direction, two-way red arrow for reciprocal direction, and two-way brown arrow for shared play). The importance of these children's friendship networks explains why it was useful to make this map. This network helped us to find data that we did not spot in our observations. For example, why was Vejay in the middle of the map? Does it have something to do with gender, ethnicity, age or size? Other children like Sree had no other connection, and this was the same with Lela. In another case, Asah had made an approach to Lela.

Two patterns of friendship were highlighted in these themes with regards to the development of children's friendships: reciprocal and shared play interaction, and interaction based on ethnic group.

First, relationships based on ethnic groups in this case can be seen in the relationships between Nini and Sree, and Simi and Ying. Why did these relationships happen? Perhaps they were because Sree and Simi could not communicate in the Malay language and could only communicate in their mother tongue. Their friends around them were from the same ethnic identity, including Gee, who was always friendly with Yee Zi. However, in the case of Raju, Adam, Irda and Lela, the relationship seemed to be instigated by other children from different ethnic groups.

Secondly, relationships based on instigated direction could be seen as in the cases of Irda, Arif, Ashok, Raju, Adam, Rony, and Yee Zi. From these relationships we found the main reason was to show

popularity between the instigators. Most of the children (instigators) in this case seemed to be 6 years old, fluent in Malay and with good social skills. These instigated interactions were created by a child who was popular among the children. For example, in the cases of Asah, Vejay, Canny and Harun initiated interactions with other children. This type of interaction only existed with a few children who had good social skills.

Thirdly, reciprocal relationships happened between a child who was popular in the classroom, as in the relationships between Canny, Vejay, Asah, Harun and Wee Jo. These were the most popular children in their class and were always interacting with others. The second reason was the seating arrangement, which encouraged them to communicate with other children, e.g., sharing coloured pencils. This study showed that the children related to each other based on reciprocal interaction. The children practised a mutual exchange in classroom activities, especially in something that was concrete. A frequent interaction was one of helping friends, and this usually initiated more interaction. For example, helping each other swing or playing see-saw together, and assisting friends in daily activities while completing schoolwork, colouring pictures, showing answers, and helping their friends to borrow pencils.

Fourthly, relationships were created based on shared play. These relationships existed between Jenny, Wee Jo, Harun, Canny and Vejay, who always created play and prompted others to join their play group (See Shared play activities Figure 1.1).

DISCUSSION

The key findings of this study found children formed friendships with cross-ethnic as well as same-ethnic peers within the multi-ethnic pre-school. Interactions were frequently instigated by popular children (refer to Figure 1.1) who have the social skills and language ability to engage others in close relationships relying on reciprocity, shared play, ethnicity and gender. This is similar to Hay, Payne & Chadwick (2004), who state that social skills facilitate peer relationships consolidated in the pre-school years, during which time peer groups become structured with respect to friendship groups, gender and dominant relations; some children begin to be rejected by their peers (Figure 1.1). We have observed that to maintain relationships, close friendship involved shared play and emotional attachment, and this is consistent with other researchers, including Corsaro (1981, 2005), Eisenberg et al. (2006) and Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (2006). The discussion of the two patterns of friendships is highlighted in this study.

Reciprocal and Shared Play Interaction

The primary findings of this research found that children relating to each other within and between the ethnic groups based on reciprocal and shared play interaction. A child develops a reciprocal relationship when assistance is needed in pre-school daily activities such as sharing something that is concrete. Children practise mutual exchanges in classroom activities, and this can also be seen in activities during free time play in the playground, such as helping friends swing and playing see-saw. Based on the frequency of interaction, these reciprocal relationships were established by mutual preference. A frequent interaction includes helping friends and this initiates more interaction with one another. These

reciprocal relationships come into being and are subsequently maintained through reinforcement by intensified interaction and reinforcement of social behaviour by others. This reciprocal mutual preference among children was confirmed both by teacher observation and interviews. This mutual preference friendship between ethnic groups frequently occurred between dyads in classroom, similar to findings from Howes (1983).

However, contrasted with the above idea is the interaction instigated by a popular child among the children. We observed in this study that the interethnic relationships emerging among the children who were popular in Figure 1.1 Pre-school children's friendship networks show a popular child relating to others based on a reciprocal direction and this relationship is developed among a dyad from a different ethnic group strongly related with play. Body contact, especially in play interaction, shows a close relationship and this may come from trust and bonding as the children build up the quality of a relationship. These relationships were not driven by gender but influenced by what kind of reciprocity they agreed on. These interactions would mostly emerge with a few children who have good social skills such as coordinating play with friends, communicating clearly, attending to the perspective of others, agreeing more than disagreeing with each other, or clarifying what they want. This ability to engage in skilful interaction was only gained by the dominant children in class. Children complied with each other's requirements and favours; bonding makes an interdependent relationship. A reciprocal relationship is very important for children in their lives to develop social skills. Children develop their mind, self and personality through social processes from social relationships (Vygotsky, 1978).

Shared play direction occurred when two or more children shared the same things together in the classroom. The children related to each other and this was instigated by the intention to play. The children shared common things that existed in pre-school like Lego, story books and education tools such as toys. They also shared objects like a pencil box, handkerchief, drinking bottle or lunch box as a topic for discussion. Within this range of objects, the children were able to build conversations from concrete to abstract objects (objects in their imagination). This helped to create pleasure among the children from different ethnic groups. In this study, by playing together, the children were building up their bonds of friendship. These findings were in line with three of the four ideas of Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (2006): that friendship is a reciprocal relationship that must be affirmed or recognised by both parties; friendship shown through reciprocity of affection represents an essential, though not necessarily exclusive, tie that binds friends together; and relationships must be understood according to their place in the network of other relationships.

Another issue emerging from my observation in this study is that children's interethnic group relationships are prominently related to each other based on shared play activity. The children go through play activities together either in classroom or outdoor activities. They relate to each other because they need a partner to play and to share fun with. Ethnic groups and gender categories do not form a barrier when the children play enjoyable games. In this case the triggers of relationships here are mutual enjoyment, and feeling comfortable with another child when they play together. Understanding friends' emotions and behaviour during play, and sharing stories and experiences together, may create and sustain friendships. These include initiating an interaction, communicating and understanding about others, and copying an activity others are doing, and all these show a willingness to become friends. In this case, the children at pre-school age were interested in interacting between ethnic groups driven by playmates rather than understanding the values of friendship, and this is consistent with previous research by Ocampo, Bernal & Knight (1993), Kawabata and Crick (2008) and Howes, Sander, & Lee (2008).

Interaction Based on Ethnic Group

The findings in this study demonstrate ethnic group separation in peer interaction and children's play contacts, as found in previous studies (e.g. Corsaro et al. 2003). It would seem that ethnicity and language form an ethnicity direction, with most children playing with the same ethnic groups. As we explained before, we would like to stress here that the children related to each other based on ethnicity with regards to two factors: firstly, when the children have problems with linguistic acquisition and secondly, neighbourhood.

This suggests that language contributes to the development of child's interaction and this is a factor in initiating relationships. Pre-schoolers who had difficulty in forming relationships with different ethnic groups were sitting quietly but their nature of helpfulness would depend on the approach of the instigator. Another main point touches on the respectfulness among these children and this does show a positive response. Children who speak Malay fluently tend to socialise easily with peers and adapt to the school environment. Our findings show that children in the same ethnic group sit together and chat among themselves and this helps to develop a strong relationship. Parental cultural capital like home language is an important factor that affects children's relationships in cross-ethnic groups.

Secondly, children related to each other based on ethnicity when living in the same neighbourhood and community involved. Assimilation into the neighbourhood by the children also helped them to build relationships with other children of different ethnic groups. They related to each other based on family norms and values at home and in the community, including home language and parents' religion. This is consistent with the argument from Bernal, et al. (1993) that although pre-school children do not really understand the significance of being a member of an ethnic group, they may be able to label themselves, as shown in our case; children were from Chinese, Indian and Malay ethnic groups which they know as ethnicities. We have seen children's ethnic identity developing gradually during the early school years such as knowing the common characteristics of their ethnic group, befriending members of the group, and comparing ethnically-based preferences as regards to mother tongue used, costume e.g. scarf and accessories such as bracelets, foods, traditional activities and religious practices. We found that in this study the neighbourhood and the community contributed towards the children's relationships. Children who stayed around with their peers at their places would also maintain close relationships. So, language and community are important factors that help to shape the social relations of children in pre-school.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDY

In conclusion, friendships were frequently instigated by popular children who have social skills and language ability. Children formed short-term friendships within and among ethnic groups but close friendships relied on reciprocity, shared play, shared ethnicities and gender. The friendships were developed through play activities initiated by the children. Children have a chance to relate when they play together among different ethnic groups and do not create borders but they do have a sense of gender in their play patterns. Children related to each other through play activities and the use of language; they learn Malay because the social relationship is being developed across language groups. Through our synthesis of evidence and framework, we have constructed *a model of multi-ethnic pre-school children's friendship networks*, developed from the data of this study.

There is also a need for further investigation that will help increase our understanding of the family processes and their consequences. Certainly, longitudinal studies that will unscramble causal patterns are crucial. Such longitudinal studies may give answers to several issues that were unanswered by the outcomes of the present research.

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