

SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG MULTIETHNIC PUPILS IN MALAYSIAN VISION SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the patterns of friendship and social interaction among multiethnic pupils in a Malaysian Vision School environment. The Vision School is a school environment which consists of two or three primary schools of different streams; that is, a National School, a National Type Chinese School and a National Type Tamil School which are placed in one area and share common facilities. The aim is to nurture unity and integration among pupils regardless of race, religion and background. The research sample consists of 89 pupils of a Vision School located in Kedah, Malaysia. They comprise 60 pupils from a National School and 29 pupils from a National Type Tamil School. Guided questionnaires were used to obtain quantitative data from the pupils. The findings indicate that a majority of the pupils in the Vision School environment were fonder of displaying friendship and interaction with friends from the same ethnic group rather than those from other ethnicities.

Keywords: interaction, friendship, pupil, ethnicity, vision school

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As a multiethnic nation, Malaysia represents the true meaning of ethnic diversity. Hence, it is absolutely difficult to sustain such a diverse society in a greater racial harmony (Khelghat-Doost *et al.*, 2011). Education plays a vital role not only in promoting and sustaining racial harmony and national integration but also in strengthening those elements for nation building. Through education, efforts have been taken to produce a generation that is united, tolerant and understanding in a truly diverse multiethnic society. In accordance to this noble aspiration, Vision Schools were introduced by the government.

The concept of Vision School was introduced by the Malaysian government in 1995 (Suseela & Nagappan, 2011). It complies with the government's agenda in imbibing racial harmony and national integration through the education system. The Vision School concept refers to a school environment which consists of two or three primary schools of different streams; that is

a National School, a National Type Chinese School and a National Type Tamil School placed in one area and sharing common facilities such as a multipurpose hall, canteen and playing ground besides having joint activities (Department of Information Malaysia, 2016; Suseela & Nagappan, 2011). The goals of Vision School are to create unity among pupils regardless of race and background, foster integration of pupils from different schools (i.e. National School, National Type Chinese School and National Type Tamil School), create a generation that is tolerant and understanding, and maximize sharing of common facilities and implementation of joint activities in school (Department of Information Malaysia, 2016).

However, there is growing disenchantment in recent years regarding Vision School. It is reported that the school is more focused on physical aspects and little on socio-cultural interaction and exchange (Suseela & Nagappan, 2011); thus, leading to several questions. To what extent does Vision School provide an environment that nurtures friendship and interaction among pupils regardless of race, religion and background? To what extent does it prepare pupils for racial harmony and national integration? These questions are extremely important because pupils of different ethnicities need to grow and move towards a multicultural mindset that reflects the reality of the true Malaysian identity as aspired by the nation.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a nation, Malaysia plays an important role in providing an education system that best addresses the calls for racial harmony and national integration. Education for pupils of different races, religions, cultures and backgrounds must be able to mould these pupils towards national identity and also solidarity (Khelghat-Doost *et al.*, 2011). Thus, schools are seen not only as an institution that provides knowledge, skills and values (Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2005) but also as a ground to promote and instill racial harmony and national integration as sought by the nation. In other words, schools should provide an opportunity for pupils to grow together; crossing racial lines and subsequently strengthening interaction, understanding, respect and social tolerance among diverse races or ethnic groups present in schools (Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2006).

The effectiveness of cross-racial contact is based on pupils' ability to form a good relationship with each other in a school environment. Friendship and interaction have almost always been key factors in developing a better understanding and respect among pupils in school. According to Allport (1954), relationship is an important element in the formation of friendship among pupils. He postulates that intergroup contact enhances intergroup relations and produces a positive change by reducing bias, prejudice and stereotypes under specific conditions (Farida Fozdar, 2011; Korol, 2017). However, it is important to note that interethnic friendship in schools in a broader perspective is the outcome of ethnic composition, pupils' opportunities to establish social relationships across ethnic groups and the selection of friends of different ethnicities (Vermeij *et al.*, 2009). Thus, the contact situation among pupils and its positive effects tend to provide a good cross-racial relationship that enhances the quality of interaction among pupils in school.

A considerable number of studies highlight the issues on ethnic relations especially on friendship and interaction among pupils in school. Pupils from multiethnic school environments were found to be fonder of displaying friendship and interaction with peers of their own ethnic group. Research on ethnic relations by Baerveldt *et al.*, (2004), Chan and Birman (2009), Clark and Ayers (1992), DuBois and Hirsch (1990) and Moody (2001)

establish this. They found that communication and interaction among pupils are more favourable with those from their own ethnic group. Bonding among pupils of the same ethnic group leads to a more open and flexible interaction and strengthens their friendship. It is of no surprise then that Chan and Birman's (2009) study affirms that the existence of a multiethnic school environment weakens the formation of friendship and social support among pupils across ethnicities. Clark and Ayers (1992) and DuBois and Hirsch (1990) also suggest that pupils prefer to develop relationships with peers of the same ethnic group rather than those who are not. Similarly Moody (2001) stated that relations are built based on race in heterogeneous schools. Thus, the lack in intercultural relations reduces the opportunity for students to establish interracial contact. Moreover, in a study of peer relations and social adjustment, Linda S. Lee (2016) found that same-ethnic peer preference reduces cross ethnic interactions in school. In addition, Baerveldt *et al.*, (2004) found that the most emotional support received by pupils in school are from intra-ethnic relationships.

In terms of social interaction among pupils in the Malaysian context, Najeemah Mohd Yusof (2006) in her study on patterns of social interactions between different ethnic groups in secondary schools found that pupils from of an ethnic group prefer to study or have discussion with those from the same ethnic group. They also seek help from friends of their own ethnicity. According to Najeemah, ethnocentrism exists among the pupils studied. Similarly, a study by Suresh Kumar (2014) on ethnicity and social interaction among multiethnic pupils in secondary schools in Malaysia found that the majority of pupils were more comfortable to socialize with friends of their own ethnicity. Pupils of the same ethnic group tend to build a better understanding of each other and the interaction strengthens their friendship. This affects interracial friendship formation, which leads to social distance among pupils. In another study, Suresh Kumar (2015) revealed that social distance is visible even though pupils share the same classroom and have choices and opportunities to strengthen their relationship across ethnic groups. His finding is in tandem with that of Yasmin Ahmad and Najeemah Mohd Yusof (2012). They also found that social distance among pupils is wide because they are more willing to involve in daily activities in school with friends from their own ethnicity. Thus, it can be said that an ethnically heterogeneous school may be formally integrated but if pupils do not have much interethnic contact and are fond of interacting with their own ethnic group, then the school is actually segregated (Moody, 2001; Stearns, 2004). Lack of social interaction among multiethnic pupils in school will promote social separation among them (Suresh Kumar, 2015). In fact, the same scenario is seen in interethnic friendship patterns in ethnically homogenous schools. A study by Tan Yao Sua *et al.*, (2013) on Malay students enrolled in Chinese vernacular schools found that the friendship pattern among pupils are intra-ethnic based and this makes fostering interethnic friendships more difficult..

Although many researchers have pointed out the lack of social interaction and friendship among multiethnic pupils, there are several who have demonstrated how schools with a multi-racial population promote interethnic friendship and interaction. Qullian and Campbell (2003) found that when school racial diversity increases, friendship among pupils also increases because of propinquity effects found among them. Hansell and Slavin (1981) in their study on cooperative learning intervention found that students make more cross-race friendships if the classroom has greater proportions of students of different races. In another study, Hallinan & Williams (1989) found that a good distribution of students in school provides more opportunities for cross-race interaction among pupils and fosters positive effects on interracial friendship. The students are more likely to find friends with similar attitude, values and behaviour besides have the opportunity to explore new similarities through interracial interaction. Similarly, Joyner and Kao (2000) found that when the number of same-race

students decreases and that of other-race students increases, opportunities to have interracial friendships are higher. Furthermore, Stearns (2004) argued that opportunities for interracial contact and friendship among students are influenced by a school's organizational characteristics and also its ethnic composition that holds high levels of ethnic diversity. Bagci *et al.*, (2014) were also of the same view. They discovered that when there are more choices for friendship in classroom, the number of cross-ethnic friends increases. In addition, the more contact a pupil has with pupils of other ethnicities, the higher the chances for prejudice and bias to be reduced towards cross-ethnic pupils. (Rutland *et al.*, 2005).

Most literature posits that in a multiethnic school environment, pupils tend to mix with those of the same ethnicity. However, Vision Schools in Malaysia believe otherwise; they can provide a conducive educational environment that would lead to racial harmony and national integration. Pupils from various ethnic backgrounds would have the opportunity to strengthen their social interaction and form friendship with each other through cross-race contact. Pupils will then grow in acceptance of the nature of a multiethnic society. However, have these schools met the noble aim of fostering social interaction and friendship among pupils across ethnicities? The present study attempts to explore the pattern of friendship; that is, the openness among multiethnic pupils in a Vision School in Kedah, Malaysia. In addition, the pattern of social interaction is also examined. Examining their pattern of friendship and interaction may provide valuable insights regarding interethnic friendship and integration experiences among pupils of different races and backgrounds. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the need and necessity to bridge the gap of social distance among pupils could be gained.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The Vision School in the state of Kedah, Malaysia was selected based on purposive sampling. This school consists of a National School and a National Type Tamil School at the same site and share common facilities such as a school canteen and sports ground. Sixty pupils were randomly chosen from the National School. They comprised thirty Year Four and thirty year Five pupils. All of them were of Malay ethnicity. Although the National School comprises Malay, Chinese and Indian pupils, only Malay pupils were selected for this study. As for the National Type Tamil School, which is categorized as an under-enrolment school, all twenty-nine pupils of Year Four and Five were selected. These pupils were of Indian ethnicity. Thus, a total of eighty-nine pupils participated in this study. Pupils from Year One and Two were not chosen as they are still in the early stages of schooling while Pupils from Year Six were left out as they would be taking their Year Six public examination. In fact, the Ministry of Education does not permit any studies to be conducted on pupils taking public examinations.

The present study employed a quantitative approach. A guided questionnaire was developed to obtain data from the pupils. The questionnaire was based on questions adapted from various studies (Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2006; Yasmee Ahmad & Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2012; Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2012; Baerveldt *et al.*, 2004). Some questions were formulated to reflect the content of Vision Schools in Malaysia. Thus, the questionnaire was pilot tested among ten pupils each from both schools before the study was carried out. It was set in dual language to ease comprehension for pupils. The close ended questionnaire consisted of three sections: *pupil's background* (6 items), *friendship* (12 items) and *interaction* (7 items). The section on demographic profile of the pupils comprises questions on type of school, a pupil's school level, gender, age, ethnicity and religion. The twelve-item scale on friendship measures interethnic friendship among the pupils studied. The questions include pupils' preference for

best friends, interaction during recess, spending time at the school canteen, studying as well as playing together. Meanwhile, the seven-item scale on interaction measures interethnic interactions among pupils. The questions include preference of friends in discussing personal experiences, culture, hobby and exchanging ideas on current issues. For each question on *friendship* and *interaction*, the respondents were asked to pick only one option that relates best to their behaviour regarding their interethnic friendship and interaction. They were requested to select one of the following responses: (1) Malay, (2) Chinese, (3) Indian, (4) Malay and Chinese, (5) Malay and Indian, (6) Chinese and Indian, and (7) Malay, Chinese and Indian.

To ensure smooth administration of the questionnaire, pupils were divided into small groups of 15 pupils each. Four sequential data gathering sessions were conducted by the main researcher himself with the pupils from National School. As for the pupils from National Type Tamil School, two sequential data gathering sessions were conducted. The questions were read to the pupils and they were asked to tick an option that relates best to them. Each session with the pupils lasted approximately 30 minutes. They were informed that all the information provided will be confidential.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The reliability analysis showed that all twelve items in the category of ‘*friendship*’ and seven items in the category of ‘*interaction*’ were consistent. The Cronbach’s alpha measure was 0.93 and 0.82 respectively which indicated that the measure of these items was reliable. Descriptive analysis was used to answer the research questions.

4.0 FINDINGS

Findings will be discussed based on the three main sections: demographic details, friendship and interaction among the pupils studied.

Table 1: Pupils’ background

	Background	Frequency	Percentage
School type	National School	60	67.4
	National Type Tamil school	29	32.6
School level	Year 4	37	41.6
	Year 5	52	58.4
Gender	Male	55	61.8
	Female	34	38.2
Age	10 years	37	41.6
	11 years	52	58.4
Ethnicity	Malay	60	67.4
	Indian	29	32.6
Religion	Islam	60	67.4
	Hindu	29	32.6

n=89

Table 1 presents the background of the pupils. It is found that 67.4% of the pupils were from the National School whereas 32.6% of the pupils were from the National Type Tamil School. A total of 41.6% of the pupils were from Year Four and another 58.4% of pupils were from Year Five. As far as age is concerned, 41.6% of the pupils were aged 10 years old while 58.4% were aged 11 years old. The percentage of pupils who were of Malay ethnicity was 67.4%. The rest (32.6%) were of Indian ethnicity.

Table 2: Friendship among pupils in school

School type	Close friend in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	86.7	0.0	0.0	3.3	8.3	0.0	1.7	100.0
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
School type	Often interact in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
School type	Often interact during recess							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	93.1	0.0	3.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
School type	Spend more time at canteen							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	89.7	0.0	6.9	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Often study together in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Often perform group discussion in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	93.1	0.0	3.4	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Often play together in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	93.1	0.0	3.4	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Share personal problems							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	98.3	0.0	0.0	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Often do revision together in school library							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	67.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0

National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Difficulty in maintaining friendship in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	0.0	10.0	81.7	1.7	0.0	1.7	5.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	72.4	17.2	3.4	0.0	3.4	0.0	3.4	100.0
School type	Preference to help during emergency st school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	98.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	65.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	34.5	100.0
School type	Feel comfortable to mix around in school							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	93.3	0.0	0.0	3.3	3.3	0.0	0.0	100.0
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	93.1	3.4	0.0	0.0	3.4	100.0

n=89

Table 2 shows the pattern of friendship among pupils of both ethnicities. It is apparent that pupils expressed a favourable attitude towards their own ethnic group. It can be observed that 100.0% of Malay pupils from the National School preferred to interact with others from their own ethnic group, even during their recess time. Moreover, all the pupils preferred to spend more time in the canteen, study and play together, have group discussions and do revision together at the school library with others of the same race. Besides, 98.3% pupils expressed a similar preference for sharing personal problems and offering help during any emergency in school. It can also be gleaned from Table 2 that 86.7% pupils were close with friends of their own ethnic group while 93.3% pupils felt more comfortable mixing with those from the same race.

A similar pattern is observed among Indian pupils from the National Type Tamil School. It is clear from Table 2 that these pupils prefer to strengthen their friendship with those from the same ethnic group. It can be gleaned that 96.6% of the pupils choose to have close friends and form interaction with those of their own ethnicity in school. Another 96.6% of the pupils preferred to study together, share personal problems and do revision in the school library with others from the same race. A similar preference is noted in their interaction during recess, group discussion, playing time and mixing around in school (93.1%). The same trend is also reflected when spending time at the canteen (89.7%) and helping friends during any emergency in school (65.5%).

An interesting finding is 81.7% of Malay pupils from the National School and 72.4% Indian pupils from the National Type Tamil School expressed difficulty in maintaining friendship with Indian and Malay pupils respectively. This suggests that pupils are more comfortable in maintaining friendship among those within their own ethnic group.

Table 3: Interaction among pupils in school

School type	Discuss about personal experiences							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	90.0	1.7	0.0	5.0	1.7	1.7	0.0	100.00
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	96.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	100.00
School type	Discuss about culture							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	80.0	1.7	1.7	6.7	1.7	3.3	5.0	100.00
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	86.2	0.0	3.4	6.9	3.4	100.00
School type	Discuss about religion							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	95.0	1.7	0.0	1.7	0.0	1.7	0.0	100.00
National Type Tamil School	0.0	0.0	93.1	0.0	0.0	6.9	0.0	100.00
School type	Discuss about hobby							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	81.7	1.7	1.7	5.0	3.3	3.3	3.3	100.00
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	86.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.3	100.00
School type	Exchange ideas about current issues							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	80.0	3.3	1.7	3.3	1.7	1.7	8.3	100.00
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	89.7	0.0	0.0	3.4	3.4	100.00
School type	Exchange ideas about academic							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	86.7	1.7	1.7	5.0	3.3	1.7	0.0	100.00
National Type Tamil School	3.4	0.0	89.7	0.0	0.0	3.4	3.4	100.00
School type	Sharing secrets							Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Malay and Chinese	Malay and Indian	Chinese and Indian	Malay, Chinese and Indian	
National School	89.3	3.3	0.0	3.3	3.3	1.7	0.0	100.00
National Type Tamil School	0.0	3.4	93.1	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.00

n=89

Table 3 presents the pattern of interaction among the pupils studied. It is obvious that pupils from the same ethnic group expressed a favourable attitude for interacting with others from their own ethnic group. In examining the results closely, it is found that 95.0% of Malay pupils from the National School preferred to discuss their religion with other Malay students. The same preference is shown when discussing their personal experiences (90.0%), sharing their secrets (89.3%), exchanging their ideas about academic matters (86.7%), discussing their hobby (81.7%), exchanging ideas on current issues (80.0%) and discussing their culture (80.0%).

Pupils from the National Type Tamil School also project a similar pattern of interaction. Table 3 illustrates that 96.6% pupils expressed a favourable attitude to discuss their personal experiences with others from their own ethnic group. A similar preference is shown when discussing religion (93.1%), sharing secrets (93.1%), exchanging ideas about academic issues (89.7%) as well as discussing current issues (89.7%), culture (86.2%) and hobby (86.2%)

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was carried out to determine the pattern of friendship and social interaction among multiethnic pupils in a Vision School. Findings indicate that a majority of the pupils were fonder of making friends and interacting with others from the same ethnic group rather than from other ethnicities. Hence, the most striking result is that social distance is visible among pupils from both the National and National Type Tamil Schools. Most pupils of both ethnicities also preferred to be involved with same ethnic group in various activities such as studying and playing together, having group discussions, sharing personal problems, doing revision together at the school library, spending time at the canteen, mixing around in school and even offering help during any emergency in school. These practices strengthen their intra-ethnic friendship. It is also revealed that the majority preferred to discuss their religion, culture, personal experiences and their hobby, share secrets as well as exchange ideas on academic and current issues with those of the same ethnicity. This strong social interaction among pupils in the same ethnic group has created a social distance among multiethnic pupils.

Effective communication and interaction among pupils of the same ethnic group provides them greater social and emotional support in a multiethnic environment. It provides strength for pupils to feel a sense of belonging towards their own ethnicity. The present findings support the argument by Clark and Ayers (1992) and DuBois and Hirsch (1990), who found that pupils in school prefer to develop better relationships with peers from their own ethnic group rather than from others. In fact, this has been highlighted by Hallinan and Williams (1987) who found that pupils from an ethnic group tend to communicate and interact effectively among themselves. Moreover, the most emotional support received by pupils in school are from intra-ethnic relationships (Baerveldt *et al.*, 2004). A recent study by Suresh Kumar (2014) verifies that pupils are more comfortable mingling with those of the same ethnicity as it helps them enhance their understanding of each other; thus, strengthening their intra-ethnic friendship rather than interethnic friendship.

The greater the intra-ethnic social and emotional support gained by pupils, the deeper the friendship among them. As a result, social distance is created between them and those from other ethnic groups. This finding is in line with that of Najeemah Mohd Yusof (2006). She believed that the preference to be with friends of the same ethnicity and their dependency on them widens the social distance, which forms a barrier for social integration among pupils of different ethnicities. Hence, the existence of a multiethnic environment in a school weakens the formation of interracial friendship and social support among pupils, as claimed by Chan and Birman (2009). Even though there are opportunities available for pupils to strengthen their interethnic relationship in a multiethnic school environment, they are not utilized due to the social distance (Suresh Kumar, 2015). One possible explanation for this is related to the accessibility of friends from other ethnicities within the Vision School compound. The Vision School in this study integrates a National School and a National Type Tamil School. However, it separates the pupils institutionally (Suseela & Nagappan, 2011). Although they share common facilities and are involved in joint school activities, there is limited opportunity for

friendship and interaction among pupils of different schools due to the independent administrative system and curriculum of each school. Moreover, there are separate staff, teachers, headmaster/mistress and pupils within the same compound (Suseela & Nagappan, 2011). Although each of the school's administration acts independently, it uses the national curriculum without interference between these schools (Najeemah Mohd Yusof, 2012). Thus, limited opportunity for friendship and interaction among pupils of these two schools and similarities among the same ethnicity in terms of language, culture, religion and beliefs strengthen interethnic bonding and enhance their relationship. These similarities help pupils develop a better understanding of their own ethnic group. Besides that, a lack in competency among teachers in emancipating pupils to celebrate diversity and embrace it as a tool for unity could also be a contributing factor for the social distance among pupils. Lack of continuous professional development programs for teachers focussing on social integration could hinder multiethnic integration among pupils.

Thus, administrators of Vision Schools need to formulate and implement more realistic goals in enhancing socio-cultural interaction among pupils in this multiethnic school environment. Teachers need to be well-trained and equipped with knowledge and competency on multicultural education in order to boost socio-cultural interaction among pupils in schools. In addition, more culturally responsive teachers are needed to steer pupils towards developing constructive racial integration as aspired by the nation. Family, school and community partnerships need to be geared holistically towards the collective goal of the Vision School to enhance ethnic relations; not by separating them institutionally. More joint activities need to be planned and implemented, not just as another activity but as a seeding ground for cross-cultural understanding and acceptance among pupils.

The present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was done in only one Vision School which is located in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. There are several other Vision Schools in other states which were not taken into consideration. Secondly, the study only focuses on social interaction and friendship among pupils in a multiethnic school environment. Further studies on school leadership and its potential contribution towards the success of Vision Schools as well as the role of teachers in promoting cross-cultural awareness, understanding and acceptance among pupils need to be carried out. Thirdly, this study did not take into account the extent curriculum and co-curriculum practices were successful in enhancing cross-cultural interaction and friendship among pupils. A study on these two aspects will bring to light how classroom teaching and learning as well as participation of pupils in co-curriculum activities prepare them for having a multicultural outlook that would subsequently create better understanding, respect and tolerance via friendship and social interaction regardless of race, religion and background. Examining these aspects would throw more light on social integration in a multiethnic school environment.

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