Intercultural communication in the Malaysian Vision Schools: Implications for the management and leadership in a multicultural primary school

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Abstract
This article discusses intercultural communication in Vision Schools in Malaysia. It also elaborates the extent to which the Vision Schools foster racial interaction across the three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. A total of 887 primary school students were surveyed across the Vision Schools. It was found that the intercultural communication in the Vision Schools had triggered intercultural understanding and awareness of cultural diversity in the schools. The dynamics of intercultural interaction were, however, more profound in the national school compared to the other two vernacular schools (Chinese and Tamil national-type schools). Nevertheless, students seemed to appreciate national integration beyond their school experience. Despite their youth, the children understood the significance of maintaining and sustaining national unity. Inspiring school leadership towards fulfilling intercultural awareness and exposure will lead the establishment and existence of Vision Schools in the right direction.

Keywords
communication, intercultural relations, intercultural understanding and multicultural education, national integration, Vision Schools

Introduction

School as the main agent of socialization and enculturation becomes the best platform to educate young children to accept and celebrate diversity. This role becomes more prominent in the Malaysian context owing to the country's unique identity as a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious nation. It is also imperative that Malaysia continuously learns, adjusts, and responds to the ever complex state of intercultural dynamics in sustaining stability and harmony in the country. Present-day challenges, which are ever more delicate and intricate, demand a holistic participation from institutions in our society to work together toward achieving national unity.

This concerted effort by all the major institutions in the country is indeed essential in achieving the country's main agenda of unity, as history has shown that uniting the three major races — namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian — in Malaysia is undoubtedly a very challenging task, particularly in ensuring that racial and religious sensitivities are taken into consideration where multicultural education is concerned.

It is argued that young children live in a simple and straightforward world. Because of that it is likely that they perceive the world as just and peaceful and perceive themselves to be part of that peaceful world. Hence it is imperative to understand how children undergo their school experience to be able to extract the idiosyncratic episodes that they encounter at school that orientate them for the future. One part of the school experience that is becomingly a common feature in today's world is diversity. In Malaysia, this common feature is embodied in the Vision School system, which sees the merging of three different school types into one school complex.

This article demonstrates students' perceptions and experiences of intercultural communication in the contexts of the Malaysian Vision School initiative. This article also

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attempts to relate the findings to the school leadership in strengthening Vision Schools.

Background of study

Malaysia is a multiracial country with three major races, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians. According to the recent figure of census of population (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2009) the population of Malaysia now stands at 28,306 million. Malays are the majority (50.8%, $n = 14,379.2$ m), followed by Chinese (22.7%, $n = 6426.8$ m), and Indians (6.85%, $n = 1938.3$ m), while others represent about 19 percent of the total population. This composition of the population witnesses the diversity in language, culture and customs, and religious beliefs.

Malaysia has gone through episodes of ups and downs in bringing these three ethnic groups to unite as one. Among the most significant challenges to national unity was the national riot on 13 May 1969 which took many lives owing to prejudices and racial sentiments. The incident shattered the dream of a united Malaysia and became a wake-up call for the ruling government to address the problem of national integration seriously. The friction in the community at that time was mostly found between Chinese and Malays. Derogatory terms and racial slurs were exchanged, and these verbal provocations led to physical assault and in extreme cases those incidents ended in fatalities (Minah Harun, 2007). Responses to this incident involved evaluation of the different systems and institutions in the society, including education. However, there are certain quarters in the society that have raised issues concerning unequal educational opportunities available to Malaysian citizens. For instance, the mainstream education is said to discriminate against the Chinese. As a result of their dissatisfaction with educational opportunity available for Chinese in Malaysia, some Chinese parents send their children to private Chinese schools to ensure that their ethnic identity is preserved (Ya-Fang Chiu, 2000). When ethnic groups isolate themselves from interacting with other ethnic groups as early as in the primary education, it is feared that this could eventually lead to discord among the different races in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Vision Schools Initiative

According to the Ministry of Education (2000), Vision School is a primary school complex in which two or three schools of different types (national, Chinese, and Tamil national-type schools) are placed together. Ideally these three school buildings are interconnected to facilitate interactions among pupils from these schools. There are four main objectives of Vision Schools which are to: (i) create integration among students from different ethnic and backgrounds; (ii) inculcate the spirit of integration among students from different school types; (iii) produce students who have high tolerance and understanding towards one another; and (iv) promote maximal interactions among members of the school community through the sharing of school facilities and implementation of school activities.

A recent study found that teachers in the Vision Schools reported having confidence in the system to promote integration, toleration, and cooperation among different ethnic groups attending the Vision Schools (Mohd Izham, 2006).

Strengthening unity and national integration are the main agendas of the Malaysian government since independence. This has been documented, emphasized, and implemented in the Malaysian educational policies and programs. For example, the Vision School initiative is one of the government's strategies to enhance national integration among students in Malaysia. According to principals from different Vision Schools, sharing common facilities will provide the space and opportunity for different ethnic groups to interact with each other. This is supported by the findings of Malakolunthu (2006) in her study on Vision Schools.

The aims of Vision Schools are to promote integration among children of different ethnic groups and to enhance understanding, cooperation, and tolerance among them (Ministry of Education, 1995). However, Malakolunthu (2006) argues that national integration cannot be achieved by the Vision Schools merely through sharing common facilities and co-curricular activities. According to her, the concept of Vision Schools should come together with strong leadership capabilities to ensure that multiculturalism prevails in all aspects of the school system. With leaders who are 'culturally responsive' in the Vision Schools, the learning experience under their leadership will benefit the goal to further enhance national integration (Malakolunthu, 2006).

Given these scenarios, it is imperative for us to investigate further the roles of intercultural communication in enhancing interethnic relations among primary school students in Malaysia. This study will illuminate the present state of inter-ethnic relations, in particular the problems and barriers of intercultural communication pertaining to the 'Vision School'.

Intercultural communication and national integration

Samovar et al. (1998) defined intercultural communication as 'communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event' (p. 48), while Chen and Starosta (1998) defined intercultural communication as 'the communication between people from two different cultures' (p. 28). Based on these definitions, it can be deduced that intercultural communication takes place when both parties have distinct differences and in which those differences may affect their communication process. The aims of intercultural communication include decreasing misunderstanding (Chen and Starosta, 1998), tolerating cultural diversity (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984), and developing adaptive culture (Dodd, 1991).

Scholars have also suggested a number of ways to understand intercultural processes including the study of emic and etic (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984), and cultural dialogue and cultural criticism (Asante et al., 1979). Our educational system should be able to support the practice

of intercultural processes to ensure that the aim of intercultural communication be achieved. Intercultural communication is also encouraged to be taught at the elementary level, because children are argued to be more adaptive to cultural differences and they would adjust their behaviors as they mature (Asante et al., 1979).

In the same vein, Fennes and Hapgood (1997) argued that the conditions for intercultural learning should be available to all. When students are exposed to an intercultural school environment they are socialized to embrace cultural pluralism. This will meet the social ground of multicultural education which aims to promote a just and good society (Bowser et al., 1995).

But the idea of a multicultural education may not appeal to all members of the society. Reflecting on the history of Malaysian education, the Barnes report suggested that a segregated school system should be abolished if integration were to be achieved. Therefore, the vernacular school system should be replaced with a national school system. This one school system was argued to be the platform to unite the three major races. Nevertheless, Chinese and Indians resisted the proposal, arguing that one school system will not safeguard the sanctity of their culture and language (Yew, 1982). The resistance was more profound among the Chinese community. In colonial Malaya, the development of Chinese education was motivated by their concern for the lack of commitment by the British colonial towards Chinese education (Yew, 1982).

In the context of Vision Schools in Malaysia, the Ministry of Education emphasizes that the aims of Vision School are to promote integration among children of different ethnic groups and to enhance understanding, cooperation, and tolerance among them (Ministry of Education, 1995). Nevertheless, Chinese national-type schools are reluctant to join this school system. For instance, in all of the Vision School complexes, only one in Subang Jaya fulfilled the ideal existence of having three school systems in one school compound. The rest of the Vision School complexes are participated by national and Tamil-type national schools. Therefore, it could be concluded that the Chinese community is still skeptical about integrating and embracing the idea of the Vision School.

Method

Participants and procedures

Questionnaires were administrated to a total of 887 samples of primary school students. A stratified sampling procedure was employed to draw the samples from 13 Vision Schools around Peninsula Malaysia in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Perak, Penang, and Kedah. The list of Vision Schools is based on the Ministry of Education. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 887 Year 6 students. The questionnaires were administered in classes in the presence of the researchers to ensure a high response rate. The distribution of the participants was as follows: Malays (46%; $n = 410$), Indians (37%; $n = 329$) and Chinese (16.7%; $n = 148$). About 58 percent ($n = 511$) of

the respondents were males, while the rest (42%) were female respondents. Most of the respondents reported that their father worked in the private sector (57.9%). About half (50.4%) of the respondents reported that their families' monthly earnings were in the range RM3001 to RM4000, while the second most frequently reported family income range was RM5001 to RM10,000 (19%).

Measures

This study is exploratory in nature, with the aim of assessing the state of intercultural communication in the Vision Schools. Therefore many aspects of the intercultural experiences of the students in the Vision Schools are measured, including their perceptions about Malaysia, other races, the school, state of national integration, and the practice of intercultural interaction in school and non-school contexts.

The statements in the questionnaires were phrased in a way that respondents answered the items at the first-person or the third-person level. Therefore, there were questions that directly required respondents to report about their own practices, perceptions, and social environment. To balance the questions, respondents were also asked to reflect on what they observe in the society pertaining to national integration, intercultural interaction among different ethnic groups, and efforts put in by their schools to enhance national integration. Similar questions were administered to the teachers and students, except for a number of items in which specific questions were addressed exclusively to either teachers or students.

In the survey, the students were asked to respond to a battery of 58 items for students, measured on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), which covered various areas pertaining to intercultural communication in the context of Vision Schools. The Cronbach alpha for the pilot survey for students was $\alpha = 0.87$. In the actual survey, the internal reliability score was $\alpha = 0.77$.

Data analysis

Two main types of analysis were conducted: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, in which descriptive statistics, correlations, and ANOVA analysis were performed. Participants also responded to a series of semi-structured interview questions, and the conversations were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded, and critically analyzed in the quest to find the main ideas and subsequent themes. The findings were based on salient emerging themes and supporting ideas and quotations, which have been rigorously checked by three co-raters for reliability and credibility of the coded data.

Results and discussion

This article will report the findings on two research questions of the study pertaining students' perceptions on intercultural communication in the Vision Schools and the

Table 1. Summary of students' responses to the status of intercultural communication in Vision Schools

	Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Q3	My relationship with people of other races in school is good.	558.1	333.9
Q4	I often have meals together with friends of other races at the school cafeteria during recess time.	330.0	559.2
Q6	I have many friends of different races at school.	334.4	550.7
Q14	If I play sports, I prefer my teammates to be a mixture of different races.	330.0	442.9
Q17	I would like to learn more about the cultures of other races.	441.3	554.8
Q18	I would like to acquire the mother tongue of another race if I were given an opportunity to do so.	335.5	553.2
Q42	The relationships I have with my friends of different races in school have definitely influenced my views about them.	441.2	334.0
Q45	I feel comfortable to have meals with friends of other races at the school cafeteria during recess time.	331.6	443.4
Q46	I feel comfortable and confident to have meals prepared by Sekolah Wawasan during Deepavali, Chinese New Year, and Aidilfitri festivals.	224.7	556.6
Q49	I understand the meaning of tolerance and national unity among races.	554.2	333.6
Q50	I have never been harshly treated with racist expressions in this school.	445.5	225.7
Q51	I like playing sports with students of other religions and races.	443.1	335.1
Q53	The students in this school do not have problems in racism.	664.5	228.1

extent to which the Vision Schools foster racial interaction among students of different ethnic groups.

Quantitative results

RQ1: What are students' perceptions on intercultural communication in the Vision Schools?

In the survey, students were asked to respond to 13 items related to the status of intercultural communication in the Vision Schools. The frequency distribution of their responses is presented in Table 1.

From the 13 items asked, only three items obtained an agreement of more than 50 percent. The highest score was item 53, which stated that students in the Vision Schools do not have problems in racism (64.5%). Slightly more than half of the respondents (58.1%) agreed that the relationship with other races in school is good and about 54 percent understood the meaning of tolerance and national unity among races. Item number 8 was phrased using a negative statement, 'I feel quite uncomfortable accepting invitations to eat at a friend's place of who is of a different race' and about 69 percent reported disagreeing with the statement. This indicates that students were rather comfortable with invitation to have meals at a friend's house from a different race. Interestingly, however, only about 25 percent of the students reported being comfortable having meals served by the Vision School during major festivals such as Deepavali, Chinese New Year, and Aidilfitri.

The data were further analyzed using zero-order analyses. The analyses produced many significant findings from the students' responses. Ten out of 13 items yielded many significant relationships with the independent factors. Race and language spoken at home were greatly significant in most of the tested relationships. For example, item 46, which stated, 'I feel comfortable and confident to have meals prepared by the Vision Schools during Deepavali, Chinese New Year, and Aidilfitri festival', was found to correlate significantly with race ($r = 0.071$; $p < 0.05$), location of the school ($r = 0.187$; $p < 0.001$), language spoken

at home ($r = 0.128$; $p < 0.001$), occupation of mother ($r = -0.112$; $p < 0.001$), and finally, family income ($r = -0.153$; $p < 0.001$). From the above findings, it was clear that location of the school ($r = 0.187$; $p < 0.001$) produced the highest r-value compared to other factors. It could be inferred that those who reported attending schools in the rural area have the tendency to report that they feel comfortable and confident to have meals prepared by the Vision Schools during major festivals.

The statement of whether they prefer their teammates to be a mixture of different races when they play sports (Item 14) was found to be significantly correlated with race ($r = 0.081$; $p < 0.05$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.110$; $p < 0.001$) and occupation of father ($r = -0.080$; $p < 0.05$). Language spoken at home produced the highest r-value compared to other factors. When ANOVA was carried out, more insights were revealed. Those who reported using Tamil at home showed more likelihood to agree with the statement. The responses of those who reported using different languages at home on that item were significantly different ($F[3,886] = 6.056$; $p < 0.001$).

Item 17, which stated, 'I would like to learn more about the cultures of other races', correlated significantly with race ($r = 0.106$; $p < 0.001$) and language spoken at home ($r = 0.137$; $p < 0.001$). The responses of both factors were significantly different at the 0.001 level, in which the difference for race was ($F[2,886] = 18.140$; $p < 0.001$) and language spoken at home was ($F[2,886] = 12.205$; $p < 0.001$).

Item 6 asked whether respondents have many friends from different races at school. This item was found to correlate significantly with race ($r = -0.070$; $p < 0.05$) and language spoken at home ($r = -0.071$; $p < 0.05$). It appears that non-Malays and those who speak other than the Malay language at home have the tendency to disagree that they have multicultural friends. However, language spoken at home correlated positively with item 51, which stated, 'I like playing sports with students of other religions and races' ($r = 0.071$; $p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Summary of students' responses on whether Vision Schools foster racial interaction

	Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Q22	School is where I learn and discover the cultures of other races.	51.5	31.8
Q23	My teachers often discuss the importance of racial integration in class.	35.4	44.2
Q24	There are many programs in this school which can help develop national integration.	33.1	58.0
Q27	My school has successfully created a strong bond among all races.	34.1	50.0
Q28	I am very satisfied with the effort put in by my teachers to foster national integration among all students in my school.	45.3	49.7
Q30	Sekolah Wawasan is very special as it integrates all the different races in one school vicinity.	37.4	54.3
Q32	I do not think Sekolah Wawasan is any different from other national schools.	34.5	51.7
Q37	The school administration provides sufficient infrastructure (e.g. cafeteria, hall, field, etc.) to foster quality communication among the cultures.	34.5	54.7
Q47	All the co-curricular activities in my school involve students of all races.	45.9	35.5
Q48	My participation in the school's co-curricular activities has successfully developed high toleration and understanding towards others.	39.4	53.9
Q52	I believe the aim of Sekolah Wawasan's establishment is successfully reached.	52.4	35.8
Q56	The teachers and support staff treat us equally regardless of our race.	50.6	39.3
Q57	My teachers have never used harsh and sensitive racist language/remark when communicating with students.	35.8	46.2
Q58	The level of national integration in this school is still low.	28.4	58.2

Those who reported attending school in rural areas showed a higher likelihood to agree with the statement that they were willing to acquire the mother tongue of another race if they were given an opportunity to do so ($r = 0.093$; $p < 0.001$).

RQ2: Does Vision School foster racial interaction?

Students were asked a number of items pertaining to their perceptions as to whether Vision Schools foster racial integration. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of their perceptions for each statement measuring whether Vision Schools deliver its aspiration (zero-order analyses yielded many significant findings).

Generally, students gave rather negative feedback on some aspects of the Vision Schools. About 58 percent of the respondents disagreed that the Vision Schools offer programs that develop national integration, while 54.3 percent disagreed that Vision Schools are special. On the other hand, about half of them (51.7%) disagreed that Vision Schools are not different from other schools. In terms of the teachers' role in imparting racial integration, 44.2 percent disagreed to that statement compared to 35.4 percent who agreed. About 55 percent of the respondents disagreed that the infrastructure supported quality intercultural communication. Nevertheless, when asked whether the level of integration is still low in the Vision Schools, about 58 percent disagreed with that statement. Indirectly, this indicates that the students in general do perceive that national integration does prevail in their schools.

Twelve out of 13 of the tested relationships emerged significant. Items 30 and 37 each yielded seven significant relationships in zero-order analyses. For example, item 30, which stated 'Sekolah Wawasan is very special as it integrates all the different races in one school vicinity', correlated significantly with gender ($r = 0.099$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.099$; $p < 0.01$), location of the school ($r = 0.124$; $p < 0.01$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.129$; $p < 0.01$), father's occupation ($r = -0.084$; $p < 0.05$), mother's occupation ($r = -0.092$; $p < 0.01$), and father's education ($r = 0.079$; $p < 0.05$). Further analyses of differences were carried out to identify any significant variation in the students' responses to their perception of Vision Schools in fostering racial interaction of different ethnic groups. Significant differences were found for all of the items tested.

Demographic background and perceptual variables

Many of the demographic variables correlated significantly with the perceptual variables, and this fact demonstrates that a student's background, including race, language spoken at home, family income, and location of school, has a significant relationship with how they perceive Vision School. Below is a summary of the observation.

Sufficient infrastructure to support quality communication across culture. Parallel to the findings of the zero-order analyses, race and language spoken at home were found to yield significant differences in the responses. However, it was also found that location of school always correlated significantly with the tested items. Item 37, 'The school administration provides sufficient infrastructure to foster quality communication among cultures', correlated significantly with gender ($r = 0.091$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.193$; $p < 0.001$), location of school ($r = 0.179$; $p < 0.001$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.272$; $p < 0.001$), occupation of mother ($r = -0.144$; $p < 0.001$), family income ($r = -0.081$; $p < 0.05$), and education of father ($r = 0.101$; $p < 0.001$). From the above findings, it is clear that language spoken at home produced the highest *r*-value compared to other factors. It could be inferred that those who reported using Tamil ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.54$) at home showed greater tendencies to agree with the statement

above compared to those who reported using other languages at home. Furthermore, analysis of variance (ANOVA) further revealed that the responses of these different groups were significant (F[3, 886] = 55.270; $p < 0.001$).

Discover the culture of others. Item 22, which asked respondents whether they agree that school is where they learn and discover the cultures of other races, was significantly correlated to race ($r = 0.121$; $p < 0.001$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.130$; $p < 0.001$), family income ($r = 0.086$; $p < 0.05$), and finally, education of father ($r = 0.068$; $p < 0.05$).

Teachers' efforts to promote national integration. Item 28 focused on the issue of whether students are satisfied with the effort put in by teachers to foster national integration. Five factors correlated significantly with this variable. They were gender ($r = 0.101$; $p < 0.001$), race ($r = 0.087$; $p < 0.001$), location of the school ($r = 0.086$; $p < 0.05$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.123$; $p < 0.001$), and mother's occupation ($r = -0.094$; $p < 0.001$). Female respondents showed more inclination to agree with the above statement ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 1.57$) compared to male respondents ($M = 3.04$; $SD = 1.60$). Nevertheless, zero-order analyses revealed that language spoken at home generated the strongest significant coefficient compared to other factors. In general, those who speak languages other than Malay at home in general showed higher agreement with this statement. For example, those who reported speaking Tamil at home showed a higher tendency ($M = 3.52$; $SD = 1.49$) to agree with the statement compared to other groups: Chinese ($M = 3.14$; $SD = 1.64$), English ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.67$), and Malay ($M = 2.92$; $SD = 1.59$). The responses on this item were significantly different at the 0.001 level (F [3,886] = 8.750; $p < 0.001$).

Co-curricular activities and involvement of all races. The students were also asked whether they agree that all of the co-curricular activities in the Vision School involve students of all races. Three positive significant relationships were found. They were race ($r = 0.125$; $p < 0.001$), language spoken at home ($r = 0.150$; $p < 0.001$), and mother's education ($r = 0.074$; $p < 0.05$).

The aim of Vision School is achieved. Item 52 asked respondents to give their views on whether 'The aim of Vision Schools' establishment is successfully reached'. About 52.4 percent of the respondents generally agreed with this statement. This item has been found to correlate significantly with race ($r = 0.113$; $p < 0.001$) and language spoken at home ($r = 0.115$; $p < 0.001$). Those who reported using Tamil as their spoken language at home showed the highest mean score ($M = 3.66$), followed by Chinese ($M = 3.35$), Malay ($M = 3.04$), and English ($M = 2.96$). The responses among these four languages were significantly different (F[3,886] = 11.497; $p < 0.001$).

The findings presented above showed that the students have varied and diverse perceptions on the role of the Vision Schools in fostering national integration. However, the students generally liked the idea of having co-curricular activities involving different races and that half of them believed that the Vision Schools deliver what they were supposed to do successfully. The fundamental aspects on fostering national integration such as mutual relationship across races, understanding the meaning of tolerance and national unity, and the absence of racism are positive signs for Malaysia to proceed with the Vision Schools program to continue propagating and nurturing the different cultures among the younger generation. In the long run, these fundamental aspects will become the main asset in the establishment of the school system which makes it unique and different from the other national schools in Malaysia.

Implications for school leadership

There is a somewhat distinct difference in a Malaysian education setting, whereas the diverse cultural difference is prominent in the school. Different types of school systems exist as different races are pursuing their own objectives. In the wake of a recent spate of incidents where teachers and school administrators uttered racist phrases, the need for understanding of multiculturalism is paramount. Teachers are labeled as racist and inconsiderate because the act of pointing out the cultural differences is considered as racism. This is reason for a need to inform teachers of the sensitivities of the races in Malaysia. Nevertheless, this study shows that there is high level of tolerance towards the other races among the older teachers. What is clear is that most teachers are conscious of the sensitivity of invitations to eat in the homes of other races because of religious restrictions. This is understood, as Islam reminds the believer to be careful of what you eat and avoid anything that is 'haram'. On the contrary, students are more receptive of invitations to eat at other races' homes as they are more conducive to other races and do not have a strong convictions on Islamic values. Interestingly, the study shows that Malay teachers have a high intolerance towards other races compared to non-Malays. Most of the Malay teachers in rural areas are very skeptical about the aims of integration between races.

The findings of this study indicate that the roles and commitment of primary school leaders in managing diversity in the Vision Schools are essential. Promoting and enhancing intercultural awareness among teachers and students of different ethnic backgrounds require a lot of political will from each school leader. As managers of the schools, the principals have the power and capacity to create a conducive environment for teachers and students to engage in meaningful intercultural interaction. The function of school leadership is not only confined to planning, controlling, and evaluating, but it also requires the principal to lead the teachers in terms of how to improve the quality of teaching in a multicultural setting.

It is recommended that better emphasis is put on teachers' professional development. Research findings indicate that there are notable improvements in education as a result of professional development. It implies that staff are

recruited not only for the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they have on appointment, but also on account of their capacities to be flexible, adaptable, creative, and amenable to change. In other words, they are appointed with the expectation and the capability of learning continuously throughout their careers. It can equip teachers with the expertise and understanding to support student learning. In most cases, teachers are appointed to teaching posts with little or no training in multicultural teaching methods. In the current climate of pressure and accountability, staff development programs have to give guidance to teachers in developing teaching strategies as well as providing the means to improve student learning, participation, and motivation.

To address the above findings, the researchers would like to suggest the following plan of action:

1. The Ministry of Education and other related agencies should develop a training module on effective management and practices on cultural diversity in the Vision School.
2. The media can play a bigger role in propagating and highlighting the intercultural communication in schools.
3. More comprehensive studies should be done to understand the challenges faced by the Vision School.
4. The Ministry of Education should revise the curriculum by integrating multicultural content and values across the curriculum.
5. The focus of multiculturalism should not be limited merely to the extra co-curricular activities but should also extend to the teaching and learning processes. For example, students from a Tamil school should be allowed to attend classes taught in a Chinese school, and vice versa.
6. The Vision School system can fulfill the aspirations of 1Malaysia and should be extended to other schools.
7. The government should convince the Chinese community and educators to accept the concept of the Vision School towards achieving national integration as well as the realization of 1Malaysia.

Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring students' perceptions and experiences of intercultural communication in the Malaysian Vision Schools and to examine the extent to which the Vision Schools foster racial interaction among students from different ethnic groups.

Young children in the Vision Schools claimed that they understood the meaning of tolerance and unity, and they reported that the relationships with other races were good. Their intercultural experiences seemed to be positive in a number of aspects such as their relationships with other people, the absence of racism in school, and the lack of negative experiences involving harsh racist treatment. But at the same time, there are aspects of intercultural experiences that they think are lacking, such as playing sports with other races, having meals with peers from different races, and learning the various spoken languages in the school compound. It is also important to highlight that the children reported that their perception towards the other races is very much influenced by their social interaction with them. In light of these findings, it is undeniably important to offer an educational environment that supports intercultural communication at a tender age so that children can appreciate and embrace diversity around them. These initial exposures are very significant in shaping young children's social perception of other cultures and races.

The data from the survey revealed the fact that race and language spoken at home often emerged significantly in most of the tested relationships. Location of the school also emerged as a frequent factor that correlated significantly with the perceptual variables. Students who had attended rural schools showed less interest in making friends from different races and attending Vision Schools, where they were given the opportunity to do so. They showed greater tendencies to perceive that other races have some prejudices against them and that they would prefer it if their current schools had students from similar ethnic groups. This finding also suggests that those students from rural areas have many reservations about interacting with people from other races. This may be because there are not many people of different races in their social environment, which limits their opportunity to interact with those of different ethnicity.

In the interest of achieving national integration, the existing Vision Schools need to evaluate the above observed notions and findings so that both their teaching and learning environment would support and build better racial integration. Evidently, different races hold significantly different perceptions on many of the issues measured in the study. The question is: Why do these ethnic groups demonstrate different social perceptions on national integration and intercultural interaction in the Vision Schools?

Inspiring school leadership towards fulfilling intercultural awareness and exposure will lead the establishment and existence of Vision Schools in the right direction in line with government's transformation plan to unite Malaysian under the 1Malaysia concept. With more concrete policies and strategies towards national integration, school leadership can mobilize its resources and manpower towards creating a better and more effective intercultural environment that could become a model to prepare pupils to practice, embrace, and appreciate diversity in a real-life environment, thus ensuring the sustainability of intercultural consciousness among young generations of Malays.

Although the destiny of the Vision School is still uncertain, it is acknowledged that its establishment is motivated by the need to address the issue of national integration in assuring the survival of Malaysia as a multiracial country.

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