

AN INVESTIGATION OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR USING THE DESIGN OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL MODEL IN A MULTICULTURAL PRE-SCHOOL

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore children's social behaviour in a multi-ethnic pre-school in Malaysia, in response to concern expressed about the development of social interaction skills. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model that the social meaning which can be attributed to any behaviour is rooted in a complex of interacting factors, observations and interviews were conducted with the children, parents and teachers. Observations of classroom activity and of free play were recorded through field notes and digital camera. The study involved 25 children and their parents, and teachers from one PERPADUAN Pre-school in Malaysia. The study revealed helpful, sharing, cooperative behaviour and respectful occurring during learning activities develops child's interaction. These behaviours that the children practised were related to the teacher's view, who acknowledged that these behaviours are stressed in the pre-school curriculum activities and in line with three ethnic groups' commonalities. Children relate to each other within and between the ethnic groups based on reciprocal and shared play activity. An ecological model of children's social behaviour Multi-ethnic Pre-school has emerged from this research extended ecological model to explain the commonalities.

Keywords: Children, social behaviour, multi-ethnic, qualitative method

Abstrak

Tujuan kajian ini untuk mengenalpasti tingkahlaku social kanak-kanak di tadika pelbagai multi etnik dengan menumpukan perkembangan kemahiran interaksi sosial mereka.

Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk daripada model Bronfenbrenner (1979) yang mana menegaskan tingkahlaku adalah berasaskan interaksi pelbagai factor yang kompleks dengan menggunakan pemerhatian dan temuduga kanak-kanak, ibu bapa dan guru. Pemerhatian terhadap aktiviti dalam kelas dan 'free play' direkodkan melalui nota lapangan dan kamera digital. Kajian melibatkan 25 orang kanak-kanak dan ibu bapa serta guru dari sebuah Tadika PERPADUAN Negara di Malaysia. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan tolong menolong, perkongsian, tingkah laku kerja sama dan hormat berlaku semasa kanak-kanak berinteraksi. Tingkahlaku kanak-kanak ini ditekankan dalam kurikulum dan selari dengan amalan ketiga-tiga etnik. Kanak-kanak berhubung antara satu sama lain sama ada dalam dan antara ethnic adalah berasaskan saling memerlukan dan bermain bersama. Satu model ekologi tingkahlaku sosial kanak-kanak pelbagai etnik yang dikembangkan daripada model ekologi Bronfenbrenner menunjukkan persamaan tingkahlaku.

Kata Kunci: *Kanak-kanak, tingkahlaku sosial, kepelbagaian etnik, reka bentuk kualitatif*

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Malaysia is unique in the sense that it has multiple school streams regardless of ethnicity and language diversity. There are two main types of public primary schools in Malaysia: national (Sekolah Kebangsaan in Malay, abbreviated as SK) and national-type (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan, abbreviated as SJK). National-type schools are further divided into Chinese national-type schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina, SJK(C) and Tamil national-type schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil, SJK(T). The medium of instruction is Malay for SK, Mandarin and simplified Chinese Character writing for SJK(C), and Tamil for SJK (T) (Malaysia, 1990). Malay and English are compulsory subjects in all schools. All schools use the same syllabus for non-language subjects regardless of the medium of instruction. However, these school systems have been heavily criticised because it has been found that children had difficulties to establish friendships, to get along with schoolmates from diverse backgrounds, and to have respect for each other either in the classroom or while doing extra-curricular activities (Yusop, 2005). Therefore, the empirical work in this case study based on PERPADUAN Pre-school as a multi-ethnic pre-school as part of preparation classes for national primary school is needed in order to investigate children's social behaviour among children from different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Social behaviour and Multi-ethnic Pre-school

Multi-ethnic pre-school refers to “pre-school that include children of different ethnic groups which is the policy of the pre-school itself to ensure the composition of the pre-school entrants consist the mix of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others. It is an aims of the Malaysian education system to unite three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia in order “to ensure national integration” (Majzub, 2006, p. 87). Social behaviour is expected to increase as a result of quality of interactions with others, and the tendency for children to seek out environments in which their behaviour patterns are reinforced (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Peer groups interaction constitutes some of the most salient socialisation contexts in which children are involved (Bukowski, Hoza, & Newcomb, 1994; Harris, 1995; Hartup, 1983). Peers relationships are particularly important in the development of children’s sense of self, interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, self-regulation (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004) during pre-school. „Ethnicity” refers to differences in descent for which primary cues such as colour, hair and facial features are culturally informative and begin to be understood well before age of three (Robinson, 1998, p. 76). The ability to recognise racial differences increases rapidly from three to six years of age, being most marked in the fourth year (Milner, 1975; 1983, p. 108). Ethnicity also reflects a group’s common history, nationality, geography, language, and culture (Graham, Taylor, & Ho, 2009, p. 395)

Researchers have assumed that children seemed to select and prefer some children over others, touching them, and engaging in positive interaction with them more than they do with other peers (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Howes, 1983). However, another study of pre-school children reported that more than one half of pre-school-age children had reciprocated friendships, and more than two-thirds of these friendships were stable over a 6 month period (Hayes, Gershman, & Bolin, 1980). Studies concerning children's peer relationships, sociability and prosocial-cooperative behaviour account for the majority of the correlates and predictors of peer acceptance (Chen, Li, Li, Li, & Liu, 2000). Among these different aspects or dimensions, sociable and prosocial behaviour functions have received particular attention in the area of social development. However, only a few of those contact studies actually measured interracial friendships, and even fewer were carried out with children. Cross-ethnic friendships are related to improved intergroup attitudes, but indeed there is a need for studies from different contexts and different approach such as longitudinal studies. Some research suggests that cross- ethnic friendships are uncommon and relatively fragile. Ethnic friendships may be optimal dyads that provide certain levels of intimate exchange, cooperation, and equality between friends from different ethnic backgrounds.

It is may help to decrease cognitive biases and may encourage the development of awareness of or sensitivity to other ethnicities (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003).

Some stylistic differences in interaction between groups relate to language use. Corsaro (1994) found that Italian pre-school children were distinguished by participation in intense and involved debates, in the USA black children through verbal jousting, and white children with the use of language to regulate their partners' behaviour. He also found that these language styles were central to the formation and maintenance of peer relationships within each group. Three Australian studies sharing similar designs and measures shed light on the way language proficiency can influence interactions between children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The findings suggest that ethnic difference may influence the quality of inter-group interaction only when one of the peers has limited proficiency in the shared language. The quality of both play and speech during interaction between a target child from the majority and two minority group peers depended on the peers' proficiency in the shared language (Robinson, 1998).

Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier and Meyer (2007) found prosocial behaviour among Malaysia pre-school children. The result from their comparative study between Western culture, Germany and Israel, and two South-East Asian cultures, Indonesia and Malaysia shown sympathy and prosocial behaviour were significantly positively correlated in four cultures. German and Israeli children displayed more prosocial behaviour as compared to Indonesia and Malaysia children in the experimental situation. The differences could be due to less ability and experience to help, and less self-efficacy to help effectively. The difference could be different context of subject culture, western children are socialized in a context where asymmetric hierarchical relations are less pronounced and independence, self-reliance, self-efficacy, and taking initiative are valued. In contrast, in a culture which promotes interdependence and respect for hierarchical relations, children may refrain from initiating prosocial behaviour, especially when face-saving values are implied (Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer, 2007). The low amount of prosocial behaviour of Malaysia children does not necessarily imply or generalise.

There needs a more research on the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia to investigate domain-specific contexts of prosocial behaviour and observe whether reverse effect can be found under specific conditions. The majority of research about social behaviour is derived from primarily Western families.

Researchers indicate that limited information exists comparing ethnic groups and cultural differences and it requires prior understanding of children in collective communities. There is need to investigate the closer contact between members of different ethnic groups and how it promotes positive racial attitude as well as the space for understanding not only the quantity of interaction but the development of interaction to establish relationships. This is responding of development of interaction which is vital to establishment and maintenance of ethnic friendships in the context of multi ethnic pre-school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is to explore children's social behaviour in a multi-ethnic pre-school in Malaysia, in response to concerns expressed about the development of social interaction skills. Specifically, it focuses on prosocial behaviour and how the children from three different ethnic groups relate to each other in pre-school. Some critical aspects need to be explored in children's peer relationships, which are the reciprocal interaction among children, the condition of interaction, and the enduring forms of interaction up to proximal processes. The experiences of children in a given face-to-face setting in difference physical, and social, that invite, permit, or inhibit, engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model represents embedded systems that have a reciprocal influence on each other. In this context a more enduring reciprocal interaction and a larger and more complex microsystem as the child grows older means enhanced development. For example, the microsystems that comprise roles and relationship (e.g., peer groups), mesosystems (e.g., schools' relationship with parents), exosystems (e.g., parents; relationships with other parents) and macrosystems which comprise all types of system within a cultural context (Ayers, Clarke, & Murray, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A child develops his or her role in interaction with the home (parents, sibling and grandparents) and then beyond (peers, teachers, and neighbours). Therefore, this study is based on an approach from the ecological perspective in which behaviour is seen as being influenced by the social and physical environment.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

A qualitative methodology had been applied in this study for its appropriateness in acquiring and analysing the data in question and the focus on social behaviour. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stress that a qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand elements of behaviours by getting to know those involved, their values, beliefs, and emotions. The research offers rich descriptive reports of individuals' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views and feelings, the meanings and the interpretations given to events and things, as well as their behaviour.

I have used a holistic or naturalistic observation to assess children. I have used direct observation to identify children's social behaviour. Rolfe (2001) noted "most direct observation is of behaviour: children's behaviour, parents' behaviour, the behaviour of early childhood staff" (p, 226). This includes observation on nature of peer interactions such as instances of quarrelling among peers, or prosocial behaviours such as comforting one another. A pilot study was carried out at one National Unity Pre-school in Malaysia by observing the children for four weeks and interviewing their parents before actual study.

The observation in classroom activity and free plays were recorded through field notes and digital camera to gain understanding of the children's social behaviour over 14 weeks. This means the overall data came from a series of representations, including field notes (observation), interviews, conversations, photographs, and recordings. Thus, data in the form of quotes from interviews, episodes from field observations, and documentary evidence are to be presented to support adequately and convincingly the study's findings.

A qualitative methodology was used in this research because it was considered to be the most appropriate way of discovering or uncovering the perceptions about children's social behaviour held by parents of different background. It was considered crucial in this research to hear personal views from Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic background groups, because the research would contribute to the planning of culturally appropriate ways to improve ethnic relationships in Malaysia and to make these relationships more resilient and vibrant.

All the interviews data were coded manually and the qualitative software package, NVivo 8, was used for organising non-numerical data. The interviews data from audio-digital recording, photographs and observation were transcribed into texts and identifying categories.

The data produced was textual in character, thus producing voluminous paperwork which was analytically demanding. These processes were a very long and time-consuming process which was sorted one by one manually and then keyed in into Nvivo programme. The purpose of the process is to get as many themes and categories that are related to the phenomenon and to identify categories related with the research question (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I have taken effective steps to make sure the validity and reliability to all the data collected including the use of multiple sources of data or views, with the aim of bringing many perspectives (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). I ensured that all children and parents had a chance to return and add any new or important information during interviews. I have carried out the informant checking during the analysis and after the analysis of data was done. During the analysis, I discussed with the respondents the data of the interview. After completing and analysing the interview I arranged two days *Mini Seminar* for the parents at the pre-school.

Location and Sampling

A PERPADUAN Pre-school in Malaysia was used for this research. This urban pre-school in Kuala Lumpur was selected according to multi-ethnic proportion base which includes three main ethnic backgrounds of Malay, Chinese and Indian. The PERPADUAN Pre-schools were introduced by National Unity and National Integrations Department in 1976. This pre-school program is mainly structured for multi-ethnic children age 5 -6 years old. Purposeful sampling technique was used in selecting the pre-school for this study (Bailey, 2007; Patton, 2002). 25 pre-school children from the pre-school were involved in the observations and interviews. After that I have interviewed the 24 of the 25 parents.

OUTCOMES

Children's social behavior

This section will describe the finding about the pattern of social behaviour. There are patterns of children's social behaviour I had identified emerged from this study: helpful, respectful, positive response, cooperative and sharing. Helpful behaviour is the prominent behaviour, which these actions are clearly seen as helping each other, gives help to anyone, not even looking at particular ethnicity.

This helpful behaviour happened without being prompted by other party (e.g., helping each other giving information, help one another with tasks, offers things). This helping behaviour can be shown through the learning activities either in the classroom or during out-door activities like physical education and movement. The pre-school classroom environment gives the children chances to practise helpful behaviour. A basic practise in this pre-school environment such as lending peers their coloured pencil. Almost all children in the class have the same practise of lending things to their peers compared a few children do not show this practises. According to my observation a child show:

She [Zi Ni] shows prosocial behaviour like being helpful every time to anyone who needed help. She lets classmates borrow her things, such as lending Harun and Vejay her coloured pencil without any asking for rewards. She likes to share things with her friends...

(Observation: Child 25, Child 9, and Child 23)

A typical behaviour related to helping each other such as giving information, help one another with tasks, offers things were prosocial behaviour examples. This refers to my observation:

Canny shows a good behaviour to other children like helping, giving information, helps Vejay to answer work sheet first and gives the answer.

(Observation: Child 6, and Child 23)

Through my observation, it was always the same children who lent friends' things in class. This helpful behaviour was a typical one in class as it has become a habit to children. They would get their friends to help them finish their work. Children who were in need would walk to the more knowledgeable child. And the children would become the centre of attention on helping the children in need.

Another issue important to highlight is respectful behaviour from children toward other ethnic groups. Children from different groups have to respect to friends, teacher, assistant teacher, their parents, visitor and elders. Children have to show the respect to other either with greeting, body language, and polite to other people. I observed that children meeting their teacher at the gate would give greetings such as *salam*, *selamat pagi* (good morning) to the teacher and assistant teacher or any adults.

At 7.45 am: Children arrived at the pre-school. The teacher normally arrived at pre-school at 7.30 am. After storing her belongings in the pre-school office, at 7.40 am Cikgu Faziah [teacher] would stand at the gate and keep the gate open. [...]

A Chinese girl with her mum arrived at the pre-school's gate, the parent said good morning to the teacher and said a greeting in Mandarin to the assistant teacher. A child (Canny) said the greeting also to the teacher and researcher. She held the teacher's right hand and then kissed it. After that she went to classroom accompanied by the assistant teacher. As usual, she left her shoes on the shelves beside the door. At 8.00 am, a few children came accompanied by their mothers. Children give the greeting to the teacher and assistant teacher. Next, they went into the classroom to keep their bag. [...] At 8.25 am, the teacher closed the school gate and went to the classroom. Finally, she called the children to stand up in the assembly area in front of the school's door. (General Observation: Morning Routine)

According to the above statement, respect is a pre-school routine that children practise every morning. Children show respect to the teacher, assistant teacher or even to the researcher and parents who come to the pre-school- friends, adults, peers, visitors. This behaviour is also emphasise at home which is a part of parental norms and values from the three ethnic groups, especially to the Malay and Indian culture as part of being obedient. Perhaps this case could be explained in the case of Adam:

Observation: Adam was shy, and obedient. It was story telling time, Adam and his friends get together around the teacher. When teacher was telling the story and showing the book to him and his friends, he listened attentively and looked at the pictures showed. He would pay fully attention to the teacher. He was respectful to the teacher and follows other's requests. He would comply with the school rules and regulation. His characteristic showed that he would prefer to agree to do something without any question. Not much talking with his friends, and his teacher. He just makes friends and socialise with friends in the group just like Canny, May Ling and Irda (Observation: Child 1).

Observation 2, Meal Time: It was break time. Adam had washed his hands and took his meal. He went straight to his seat and sat down quietly. He did not talk much. He only listened to what his friends said and only comment on it if he thinks it is necessary (Observation 2: Child 1).

Observation 3 Watching TV program: Every single activity I have observed Adam, he always in front. He won't let the teacher pushes him. He only concentrates to the TV program so that he won't miss the story (Observation 3: Child 1).

For more information I interviewed Adam about his friends and activity based on a few photographs.

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For more information I interviewed Adam about his friends and activity based on a few photographs.

R: Could you tell me about your friends based on these photographs?

Adam: I like to be friends with Canny because she is kind to me. I don't like to be friends with Jenny because she doesn't want to be friends with Elin and me.

What are you going to say if your friends were sick, he replied, "I will help friends and care for them" (Interview: Child 1)

The teacher commented about Adam: A little bit quiet compared to other Malay boys. He only talks among the group members. He doesn't walk around. He doesn't socialise much with his friends. His work is neat and good but he did it slow. He is a nice child, respects the teacher and helpful. Always helps other children but needs request. He is not naughty (Interview: Teacher).

Referring to the above case and other cases, many children keep silence most of the time because they are listening attentively to the teacher. In the context of Malaysian culture, being silent while a teacher is teaching is a way of showing respect. Being silent and restrained from asking any question especially during the teaching and learning process is preferred because in the Malay culture, silence is valued as a good behaviour.

Children's relationships

There are the patterns of children's interaction which are shown at this pre-school: reciprocal, shared-play, ethnic group interaction and gender interaction. The results show children related to each other based on a reciprocal relationship. Children practised a mutual exchange in classroom activities, especially in something that is concrete.

A frequent interaction would include helping friends which initiates more interaction with one another. For example, helping to swing each other with friends or playing see-saw together at the play ground, and assisting friends in daily activities while completing the task, colouring pictures, showing the answer, and lending their pencils to whom needed. The reciprocal relationship will be reinforced by intensified interaction and reinforcement of social behaviour by others. This is shown in a case of reciprocal relationships between Asah and Wee Jo:

Wee Jo came to Asah's place and asking Asah the colour he needs. He looked for the colour pencil. Wee Jo was searching for the right colour pencil to use. Later, Asah let Wee Jo searched the colour he needed in her colour pencil case. Asah recommended which colour pencil Wee Jo should use.

"Do you always lend your colour pencil to Wee Jo? Yes teacher, I also always help him. He helps me as well. We are good friends." (Interview P028: Child 2 and Child 24)

Based on statement above, a reciprocal relationship is maintained when a dyad interaction continued and at the same times social behaviour like helping each other is shown.

The frequency of interaction between dyad does not only help to enhance the reciprocal relationships, but also creates a more intimate relationship. For example in daily activities in the classroom, acting to help will be enhanced with advice and ideas that are more complex would emerge in the mind.

Is there a difference between Indian and Chinese children towards Malay children who are categorized as dominant groups in the community? Back to Asah's case with Wee Jo, I can explain here, the relationships among the Indian and Malay child is not being restricted by ethnic background. On the other hand, the relationship was driven by the reciprocal relationship and positive social behaviour among them. For example, the evidence from the observation between her and Suriani:

Asah came to Suriani, and asked about sweets that she had. Suriani took some of the sweets from her pocket and gave them to Asah to cheer her up. She was willing to share with Asah. (Interview P064: Child 2 and Child 21)

The above statement has given us the picture of the reciprocal relationship between Indian and Malay girls which is based on the willingness to share with others. This reciprocal relationship does not only relates to the positive social behaviour but may also be correlated with other factors such as personality.

Next, shared-played direction would be identified with two or more children sharing the same things together in classroom. The children would relate to each other as instigated by their intention to play. They shared common things that existed in the pre-school like Lego, story books, education tool such as toys. The children also shared objects as a topic to discuss like pencil box, handkerchief, drinking bottle and lunch box. Within this range of objects, the children are able to build conversation from concrete objects to abstract objects (the object from their imagination). That particular action created a pleasure among the children from different ethnic groups. In this study, by playing together, the children would be building up their bond of friendship. Another issue emerging from this study would be the children relating to each other because of the playing activities they had to go through together during free time or learning time, either in classroom or outdoor activities. This shared-play activity would be initiated by the children. This initiated an interaction, communication and understanding about others and imitating the activity that other children were doing showed willingness to be friends.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings it may be concluded that social behaviour of young children in multi-ethnic pre-school may be affected by the way in which pre-school ethos and teacher are set up for them. Arranging physical environments and the activities in learning either in classroom or out-door activities may create a better context for positive social contacts especially at the early months. Children show willingness to help each other even though they are from different ethnic background. This behaviour supported by positive response behaviour which children help other ethnic group when they are requested. For example a Chinese girl is giving help when requested such as giving them opinion to colour pictures or give the answer. Children need advice and support, such as material aid for example coloured pencil, or even the answer. This finding is consistent with previous studies showed children's social behaviours such as helping, caring, and sharing have repeatedly been shown to be associated with prosocial classroom environments (Bandura, 1977; Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

Classroom environments may work by exposing children to competent peers who can model helping and caring behaviours. Prosocial behaviour e.g., children who play cooperatively were more likely to be accepted by peers, whereas aggressive children tended to be excluded by peers (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). This finding is similar with Shoheta and Klein (2008) which the physical environment plays a role in early development social behaviour and can be affected by changes in the physical environments; more specifically, the way in which their play materials are presented. The physical environment has been identified in various studies as having a powerful effect on young children's play and social (Shohet & Kleinb, 2008). However, pre-schooler may need additional support from the teacher in order to create positive social contacts with their peers.

I have observed helpful, sharing and cooperative behaviours occurring frequently during learning activities, either in the classroom or during outdoor activities like physical education, or free playing within the school's geographical space. Teacher-planned seating has led to peer interaction within and between ethnic groups. The children show a willingness to help, share and cooperate with other children even though they are from different ethnic backgrounds. However, helpful behaviour during free time in the playground seemed to be between children who had close relationships, and this is important in order to maintain their friendship. This behaviour would positively prompt children to interact regularly with different ethnic groups. Cooperative and sharing behaviour in outdoor activities happened when children played together; this was led by popular children and was related to their past relationship. Both behaviours seemed to be related to regular contact which involved children who interact in everyday partnership. These behaviours were also related to the group seating pattern formed by the teacher in order to encourage children's sharing. Most cooperative and sharing behaviours happened in classroom activities through the teacher's planning. Involving sharing between the ethnic groups and genders, they also gave the children a chance to develop relationships leading to friendships. That the ability to cooperate with others develops further in the pre-school years is consistent with the findings of Hay, Payne & Chadwick (2004) and Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad (2006) regarding prosocial behaviour (helpful, sharing and empathy) towards others.

The study revealed that, based on cross-referencing between three sources, helpful, sharing and cooperative behaviours that the children practised were related to the teacher's view, who acknowledged that these behaviours are stressed in the pre-school curriculum activities which are part of the syllabus. The pre-school ethos aims to integrate children from different ethnic groups and this is prominently part of the PERPADUAN Pre-school principles.

Interviews with parents have shown that this is in line with the parental norms and values of collective oriented culture in families that encourage helpful, sharing and cooperative behaviours across ethnic backgrounds. Based on the current findings, I have concluded that social behaviour of young children in multi-ethnic pre-school may be affected by the way the teacher sets up the pre-school ethos for them. Arranging the physical environment, geographical space and the activities in learning either in the classroom or outdoors may create a better context for positive social contacts especially in the early months. This finding is similar to that of Shoet and Klein (2008), who asserts that the physical environment plays a role in the early development of social behaviour and can be affected by changes in the physical environment; more specifically, the way in which their playing materials are presented. The physical environment has been identified as having a powerful effect on young children's play and socialization. However, pre-schoolers may need additional support from the teacher in order to create positive social contacts with their peers.

Another issue of importance to highlight in this study is respectful behaviour from children towards other ethnic groups. This behaviour is significantly emphasised both in pre-school and at home. Based on my observation, pre-school children from different groups have to respect friends, teachers, assistant teachers, their parents, visitors and elders. They show respectful behaviour either through greeting and hand kissing, or by using good body language, and being polite to other people. This behaviour is also emphasised at home, and forms part of parental norms and values of the three ethnic groups. Practising respectful behaviour in pre-school is in line with the parental cultural capital at home and has become one of the daily routines in the pre-school ethos. I also discovered that there were several cases of children who were perhaps too respectful and obedient. Being obedient is prominent in the Malay and Indian cultures. These findings are in line with Corsaro (1992) who views children's peer culture as a stable set of activities or routines, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers as an interpretive reproduction of adult culture (Corsaro, 1992, p. 162). These are transformed constructively within activities in the local cultures that make up their everyday lives such as family, pre-school, and peer group. Similar to Kawabata and Crick (2008) the findings revealed that these behaviours from cross-ethnic group children in the classroom context were more likely to be viewed as led from the teacher setting.

The primary findings of this research found that children related 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 a mutual exchange 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 are 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 by teacher observation and interviews. This mutual preference friendship between ethnic groups frequently occurred between dyads in classroom, similar to findings from Howes (1983).

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 conversation 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 are 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 are 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).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of this study is about the theoretical framework which I draw it through my synthesis of evidence and framework. I have now added an ecological model of children's social behaviour in multi-ethnic pre-school developed from the data of this study. The data has provided an innovation and idea of this model based on themes from the study. I have developed an ecological model of children's social behaviour (Figure 1) in order to understand how interaction and relationship of peers. Referring to Figure 1, children interacting with each other from different ethnic groups developed social roles in context of their relationship. In the middle of model, this shows the commonality of social behaviour they practised from their own ethnic groups. This diagram shows the children's social behaviour in the context of Malaysian multi-ethnic country. Three circles in the diagram show the elements ethnic groups children (e.g., green (Malay), red (Chinese), and blue (Indian)).

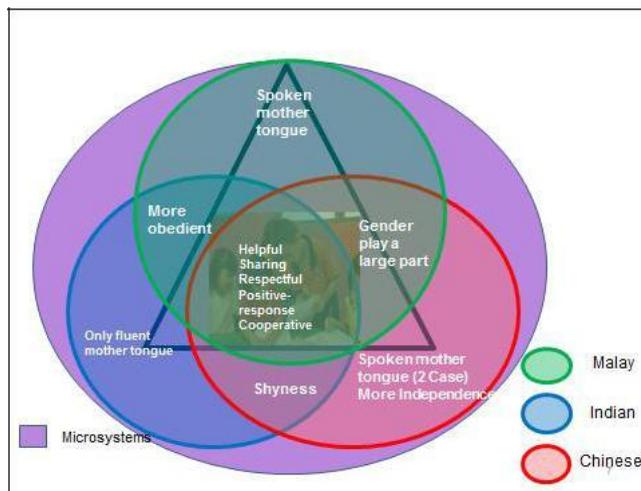


Figure 1: An ecological model of children's social behaviour Multi-ethnic Pre-school

There are similarities and differences in the behaviour between ethnic groups and within ethnic groups. Among the differences and similarities exist then the core is the same social behaviour among the three ethnic groups. I have shown the interlocking between three ethnic group bases on the commonalities between two ethnic groups and three ethnic groups. The centre shows that they come together and overlap on children's social behaviour. The centre of the diagram is the social behaviour which is accepted from three different ethnic groups. This element of behaviour is important to be established in the PERPADUAN Pre-school. However, the commonalities behaviour is influenced by age, gender, and ethnicities of children. Some behaviour is not similar, belonging and involving only one ethnic group which is related to ethnicities. This is associated with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, p.104) view that "human development is facilitated through interaction with persons who occupy a variety of roles and through participation in an ever-broadening role repertoire". In this case the parent is expected to provide guidance to the child parallel with the societal expectation from the ethnic groups and expectation from the pre-school. However, the role between two institutions may be different and there are many possibilities which contrast between two different entities (parents and school or community) because of the ethnicity. Interaction between individual is important for the development of sense of individual such as self-control (Chen, Chung, & Hsiao, 2009) in order children to compromise for sustain their peer's relationships. Finally, this paper is expected to contribute to the existing intellectual discourse and scientific inquiry, particularly in term of generating methods to understanding children's social behaviour from different ethnic groups pre-school.

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