



Parental choice of schooling, learning processes and inter-ethnic friendship patterns: The case of Malay students in Chinese primary schools in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study surveys 200 Malay students enrolled in three Chinese primary schools in relation to three issues, i.e., parental choice of schooling, learning processes and inter-ethnic friendship patterns. The three issues are explored through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Parental expectations for their children's learning and academic outcomes emerge as the dominant factor influencing Malay enrollment in Chinese primary schools. Unfortunately, the Malay students are unable to meet these high expectations due to learning difficulties that stem from the lack of proficiency in the Chinese-medium of instruction, despite intervening measures by the school authorities. Their learning difficulties are also compounded by the lack of parental inputs as well as the limited use of code-switching by teachers. Meanwhile, the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships is impeded by ethnic differences, the rise of Islamic awareness and the increased numerical size of Malay students. However, there is a willingness among the Malay students to interact with the Chinese students through task-related activities, indicating that the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships needs to be guided by a convergence of interests.

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1. Introduction

The Malaysian educational system allows for the coexistence of three types of primary schools – national primary schools, Chinese primary schools and Tamil primary schools, to cater to the educational needs of its three main ethnic groups, i.e., Malays, Chinese and Indians. The national primary schools are mainstream primary schools that use the national language, i.e., the Malay language, as the main medium of instruction, while the Chinese and Tamil primary schools are vernacular primary schools that cater to the mother tongue education of the Chinese and Indians. However, a common content curriculum is imposed on all the primary schools to bring about a common process of enculturation among the students throughout the six years of primary schooling. In other words, the common content curriculum serves as “the overarching link” (Santhiram, 1996, p. 42) for the fostering of a core of shared values among the primary school students. The coexistence of the Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium primary schools alongside the national-medium primary schools was the result of the strong assertions of the Chinese and Indians for language and cultural maintenance following their large-scale immigration to Malaya (Malaysia since 1963) – a Malay heartland, beginning in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries (see Tan, 2005;

Tan and Santhiram, 2010). The promulgation of the Razak Report prior to independence in 1957 provided the legal basis for the adoption of a multilingual primary school system alongside a monolingual Malay-medium secondary school system (see Federation of Malaya, 1956; Tan, 1997, 2012b). However, as we shall see, the multilingual primary school system, especially the vernacular primary school system, was subsequently viewed with much distrust by the Malay-dominated government.

While the Chinese and Tamil primary schools cater mainly to the interests of the Chinese and Indians, the national primary schools, being mainstream primary schools, are supposed to transcend ethnicity and become a common platform of socialization for children of all races. But they have failed to attract a sizable number of non-Malay students, especially in areas where the Chinese and Tamil primary schools could also be found within the same vicinity, and have thus remained largely a Malay preserve (see Santhiram and Tan, 2010). In fact, non-Malay students only constitute a very small minority in the national primary schools. In 2002, for instance, from a population of 2,211,971 students enrolled in the national primary schools, the number of Chinese students was a mere 46,670 (2.1 percent) and Indians 95,180 (4.3 percent) (Mahat, 2005). Interestingly, while the national primary schools have failed to attract more non-Malay students, there is a steadily increasing inflow of non-Chinese students into the Chinese primary schools since the 1990s (see Shen, 2006). In 1985, for instance, there were fewer than 8000 non-Chinese students enrolled in the Chinese primary schools

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(New Straits Times, 7 April 1995). But by 1993, their numbers had increased markedly to 21,508, constituting 3.66 percent of the total Chinese primary school population (Nanyang Siang Pau, 19 October 1993). In 1995, their numbers were well over 35,000, of which 25,000 were Malay students (New Straits Times, 7 April 1995). Their numbers continued to increase since then. In 2006, out of a total of 639,310 Chinese primary school students (Ho, 2008), 60,096 students or 9.4 percent were non-Chinese students (Nanyang Siang Pau, 7 September 2006).

Choice of schooling in Malaysia is usually decided by demographic factors. Children are assigned by the relevant authorities to schools located within the vicinity of their homes. This is primarily because the Malaysian educational system is a state-controlled educational system. Plank and Sykes (2003) note that in such a system, children are assigned to schools strictly on the basis of a set of objective criteria, among which is residence in a clearly defined attendance zone. However, in the Malaysian case, parents are allowed to decide on their children's choice of schooling when there are several schools located within the vicinity of their homes. It is against this backdrop that non-Chinese enrollment in Chinese primary schools merits our attention primarily because such an educational development was least expected by the government when it instituted the multilingual primary school system prior to independence. The multilingual primary school system was in fact instituted out of political exigencies to accommodate the strong linguistic and cultural assertions of the Chinese and Indians. It was subsequently regarded by the Malay-dominated government as malintegrative due to its segregated nature of schooling. The first attempt to desegregate the multilingual primary school system came in the mid-1980s when the government established the integrated schools. But this attempt which aimed at merging the three different types of primary schools with the national primary schools playing the lead role failed to take off primarily because of the strong objection from the Chinese educationists – the vanguards of Chinese education in Malaysia, who stood for the maintenance of the character of Chinese primary schools which relied on the use of the Chinese language as the medium of instruction as well as the language of administration and wider communication. The failure to establish the integrated schools did not halt attempts by the government to desegregate the multilingual primary school system. In the mid-1990s, the government initiated the establishment of the vision schools which were rather similar to the integrated schools but with slight modifications regarding the autonomy of participating schools. Again, this initiative was rejected outright by the Chinese educationists (see Santhiram and Tan, 2002, 2010). Attempts to desegregate the multilingual primary school system re-emerged in 2006 following the launching of a 5-year Educational Development Blueprint by the Ministry of Education in which the national primary school was envisaged as the ultimate school of choice for all races. This was to be achieved through a comprehensive strategy of upgrading that aimed at strengthening the national primary schools (see Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006; Malaysia, 2006). Given the above, it is clear that increasing inflow of non-Chinese students into the Chinese primary schools has worked against the interests of the government to uphold the national primary schools as the crucible of the national building process in Malaysia. However, to the Chinese educationists, they use this emerging trend as a rebuttal to the government's stand that the vernacular primary schools are the root cause of racial polarization in the country (see Kua, 1987). But such an unexpected educational development has also raised concern among the Chinese educationists over the possible change of character of the Chinese primary schools.

The decision of non-Chinese parents, especially Malay parents, to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools is particularly worthy of note primarily because they have opted for a different educational pathway for their children as compared to the majority who enroll their children in the mainstream national primary schools. Such a decision would have been influenced by factors that favor the Chinese primary schools over the national primary schools. There is thus a need to explore these factors empirically to understand such a parental choice of schooling, more so when most of the existing views on Malay enrollment in Chinese primary schools are not informed by empirical research.

It is generally the case that parents tend to enroll their children in schools that could ensure that their children excel in the educational process. In this regard, school effectiveness has become a major factor influencing parental choice of schooling for their children. School effectiveness is determined by many indicators such as scholastic attainment, classroom behavior, absenteeism, attitudes of learning, continuation of education, employment and social functioning (Rutter, 1983). School effectiveness also includes other indicators such as strong administrative leadership, high expectations for children's achievement, an orderly atmosphere conducive to learning, an emphasis on basic-skill acquisition and frequent monitoring of pupil progress (Purkey and Smith, 1983). However, there are scholars who question these indicators. Harber (2004), for instance, raises the need to re-look at these indicators in relation to the fundamental purposes of education. He is particularly concerned with two key questions regarding the fundamental purposes of education: What sort of individuals and what sort of societies are we trying to create? How is education being used to achieve these purposes? Coffey (2001) is more direct in his rejection of these indicators, especially examination performance, as one of the outcomes of the educational process. He argues that "it is important to recognize that educational outcomes go beyond the simple equations of externally measured performance" (p. 75). But attempts to bring about a paradigm shift on the use of indicators to evaluate school effectiveness have not been overly successful.

Apart from parental choice of schooling for their children, this study also looks into two important challenges of schooling faced by Malay students enrolled in the Chinese primary schools, i.e., their learning processes and their socialization with the Chinese students. From the perspective of learning, these students have to learn through a second language as the Chinese language is not their mother tongue. As such, their proficiency in the second language becomes the underlying concern of this study. The possibility of a language barrier cannot be ruled out here. In fact, scholars have long recognized the inherent difficulties of learning through a second language (see, for example, Baker, 1993; Macnamara, 1967). Given that a second language is generally the weaker language of most children, it follows that an inadequate grasp of the medium of instruction is the norm rather than the exception. This is even more so in the early years of schooling when most children are unlikely to acquire a high level of cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP) (see Cummins, 1979, 1984, 2000) in a second language. A clear distinction must be drawn between CALP and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) in a second language, however. BICS involves context-embedded (contextualized) and cognitively undemanding face-to-face communicative skills, which include the ability to handle complex conversation using contextual cues such as paralinguistic feedback from other speakers (e.g., gestures and intonation) and situational cues to meaning (Ovando and Collier, 1985). Context-embedded language skills can be easily acquired within two years (Kerr and Desforjes, 1988). Part of the reason why communicative skills are acquired easily is because they are context-embedded and children

learn these aspects of language through interaction with peers (Romaine, 1995). In contrast to BICS, a longer period of seven to eight years is needed to acquire the CALP of a second language (Kerr and Desforges, 1988). In addition, high level of exposure to the language and motivation are also required (Cummins, 1984). These extra requirements are necessary because the acquiring of CALP involves linguistic ability to engage in abstract thought in cognitively demanding and context-reduced (decontextualized) circumstances (Ovando and Collier, 1985). The CALP is in fact closely related to literacy skills (Romaine, 1995) that facilitate language use for higher-order cognitive purposes (Genesee et al., 2008). Although the two linguistic constructs of CALP and BICS have been the subject of considerable debate (see, for example, Edelsky et al., 1983), they, nevertheless, warrant consideration here because of their prevalence in current research on second language literacy (Genesee et al., 2008).

Given the above, Malay students enrolled in the Chinese primary schools may not be able to fully realize their learning potentials as far as their proficiency in the medium of instruction is concerned. Inevitably, they will have to face the adverse consequences of learning through a weaker language. These adverse consequences are succinctly captured by Macnamara (1967):

The student's difficulty in following courses in his weaker language might seem at first sight to lie solely in his ignorance of certain words, phrases or syntactic structures. However, there is probably more to it than that. Those of us who read a second language poorly will probably from time to time have experienced difficulty in following the meaning of complex passages in that language, even though we could have translated each individual word and expression used (p. 123).

It is indeed a daunting task for students to learn through a second language when they have not acquired the required CALP in the language. As such, there is a need for intervening measures from the schools and teachers to help them overcome the language barrier otherwise they will have to sink or swim on their own in a language-biased learning context. In the case of teachers, for instance, they could resort to the use of code-switching as an intervening measure. The effectiveness of code-switching in facilitating classroom instruction in a second language has been recognized by many scholars. Canagarajah (1999), for instance, holds that code-switching serves some positive functions in the instructional processes – the code alternation helps teachers and students to manage their classroom interactions efficiently, and to negotiate the pedagogical content meaningfully. Meanwhile, Ambatchew (2010) notes that code-switching serves four purposes: to facilitate students' understanding, to facilitate teachers' expression, to facilitate the teaching of terminology and to facilitate private conversation. The benefits derived from the use of code-switching are thus self-evident as far as learning through a second language is concerned. Notwithstanding these intervening measures, learning through a second language, especially in the formative schooling years, has gone against the well-established notion that children should learn through the language that they know best, i.e., their mother tongues (see Pattanayak, 1986; Szepe, 1984; Cummins, 1979). The strength underpinning the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction for a particular student is well illustrated in *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Schools* – a report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1953:

Psychologically, it [mother tongue] is a system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification

among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (cf. Todd, 1983, p. 165).

From the perspective of socialization, this study explores the friendship patterns of Malay students within a predominantly Chinese environment. Friendship, according to Aboud (2009), is the gold standard of contact because it provides the context for necessary emotional, cognitive and behavioral change. This includes: intimacy, empathy and anxiety reduction on the emotional side; personalized individual difference information about the friend and a perception of between-group similarities on the cognitive side; and behavioral skills in cooperation and conflict reduction. Aboud also holds that in inter-group situation, friendship is considered the result of close and personalized group contact. It is in inter-group situation that friendship patterns among children from different ethnic backgrounds have become a major concern that underpins the socialization process of schooling in plural societies. Despite the dire need of friendships that transcend ethnicity, studies have consistently shown that friendship patterns in inter-group situation tend to reflect a high degree of "keeping self-to-self" (Verma et al., 1994, p. 109), i.e., children draw their close friends from their own ethnic groups. This kind of friendship pattern which reflects a high degree of "in-group favoritism" (Stangor, 2004, p. 129) does not augur well for the fostering of inter-ethnic relations in plural societies. But then inter-group contact has always been a hotly contested area. Inter-group theorists have long argued that positive outcomes in inter-group contact will only be possible if intervening measures are put in place to facilitate this contact (see Allport, 1979; Pettigrew, 2004; Johnson and Johnson, 1992; DeVillar and Faltis, 1994). For instance, within the classroom context, DeVillar and Faltis (1994) posit the use of cooperative learning activities as a pedagogical strategy to foster social integration and interaction. This is because such activities theoretically satisfy four interconnected and mutually supportive conditions that favor successful social integration and interaction: preparation in interpersonal and small group skills, face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence and individual accountability for learning the concepts and information germane to the task. In short, the fostering of inter-ethnic friendship must be guided by purposeful social interaction otherwise mono-ethnic friendship patterns will always be inevitable.

2. Research methodology

This study involves three Chinese primary schools located in areas where there are a number of national primary schools. All the three sample schools have a high enrollment rate of Malay students. In two of the sample schools, the Malay students constitute about 10 percent of the total school population. In the other sample school, the enrollment rate of Malay students is even higher at about 22 percent. This study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies whereby generalizations obtained from quantitative data are supplemented by qualitative analysis during in-depth interviews. It was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved the gathering of quantitative data through two sets of questionnaires. The first set of questionnaires was targeted at the parents. A total of 200 parents were selected for this purpose. This set of questionnaires was divided into two sections. The first section consisted of 20 structured questions designed to collect the parents' background information as well as some questions regarding their children's learning processes. The second section consisted of 27 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). These items were designed to extra factors influencing the parents' decision to enroll their children in the Chinese primary

schools. They consisted of seven speculated factors: achieving better learning outcome (6 items), achieving better academic outcome (3 items), quality of teaching (6 items), general strength of the school (3 items), instrumental value of the Chinese language (3 items), strengthening inter-ethnic relations (3 items) and learning the Chinese language and culture (3 items) (see Appendix A). These factors were picked based on a review of existing literature on non-Chinese enrollment in Chinese primary schools as well as other relevant literature (see Tan, 1984, 2002, 2006; Lee, 2004, 2007). As we shall see, most of these factors are successfully extracted except for the first and second factors which merge to form a new factor.

The second set of questionnaires was administered to students whose parents were selected to answer the first set of questionnaires. These students consisted of 88 female students and 122 male students. They were selected from Primary Year 2 to Primary Year 6: 16 were Primary Year 2 students, 44 were Primary Year 3 students, 45 were Primary Year 4 students, 44 were Primary Year 5 students and 51 were Primary Year 6 students. The questionnaires were divided into two sections. The first section consisted of 12 structured questions designed to collect the students' background information as well as some questions regarding their academic achievement and friendship choice. The second section consisted of 23 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). These items were designed to explore the various dimensions of the students' learning processes as well as their interaction with the Chinese students. Prior to the actual study, a pilot study involving 40 parents and students were conducted in one of the sample schools to validate the two sets of questionnaires.

The second stage of the study involved in-depth interviews with students and parents (selected from those who took part in the questionnaire survey) as well as teachers and administrators. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a set of interview guidelines that aimed to elicit opinions on the statistical findings from the first stage as well as other emerging issues. The interviews involved 40 students, 20 parents, 15 teachers and three administrators. Data collected from the interviews were cross-examined to draw conclusions.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Chinese primary school as a choice of schooling for Malay students

In exploring the decision of Malay parents in this sample to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools, we subjected our data to a principal component analysis via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 16.0) with a minimum loading of 0.50. The final results of the rotated component matrix extracted six factors which contributed 73.1 percent of the total variance (see Table 1). The six extracted factors were achieving better learning and academic outcomes (F1), quality of teaching (F2), general strength of the school (F3), instrumental value of the Chinese language (F4), strengthening inter-ethnic relations (F5) and learning the Chinese language and culture (F6). All items supporting the respective extracted factors showed a high internal reliability with Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from 0.710 to 0.924 (see Table 2). Out of the original 27 items, two items were removed while conducting the principal component analysis as they failed to meet the minimum loading of 0.50. From the six extracted factors, achieving better learning and academic outcomes emerged as the dominant factor contributing 41 percent of the total variance. The other five extracted factors only contributed marginally to the total variance. Nevertheless, all the six

extracted factors were positively correlated, though low for most cases (see Table 3).

Clearly, the Malay parents in this sample have high expectations for their children's learning and academic outcomes when they choose to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools instead of the mainstream national primary schools. Indeed, our interview findings indicate that many of them were attracted by the strong emphasis on the students' learning and academic outcomes in the Chinese primary schools. One informant had this to say:

The Chinese primary schools are extremely demanding as far as learning and academic outcomes of the students are concerned. This has become a school ethos that the Chinese primary schools in this country are particularly noted for. As a result of this, Chinese primary school teachers show a high level of commitment toward their teaching duties. They are seldom late to their classes and more often than not, teach with a strong conviction to ensure that their students learn and achieve good grades. More importantly, they assign a lot of exercises and homework to their students. Students are therefore hardly left idle in school or at home. Also, students are expected to do corrections, sometimes repeated corrections, if there are mistakes in their exercises and homework. Mistakes are seldom overlooked by the Chinese primary school teachers who believe that students must learn from such mistakes. In addition, extra classes after school hours and during the school holidays are conducted by the Chinese primary schools as a means to help the weaker students. This is why the Chinese primary schools are able to outperform the mainstream national primary schools, despite the latter's better infrastructural facilities.

The strong emphasis on the students' learning and academic outcomes in the Chinese primary schools has a lot to do with their commitment to an assessment culture. Such a commitment is inevitable given the fact that the Malaysian educational system is highly examination-oriented and performance in public examinations has long been a main yardstick through which the Ministry of Education evaluates school effectiveness (see Raja Musa, 2008). This has led to school authorities taking extra measures to ensure that their students excel in public examinations. The recent decision by the Ministry of Education to rank schools based on performance in public examinations as well as its own evaluation system has further entrenched the importance of examination results as a key performing indicator (see Tan, 2012a). It is within this context that the Chinese primary schools have emerged stronger than other types of primary schools as they are able to internalize this assessment culture among their teachers and students. As one administrator put it,

The quest for academic excellence has been a much cherished tradition of the Chinese primary schools. It is through painstaking efforts over the years that such a tradition has finally become the hallmark of the Chinese primary schools in this country. It is within this tradition that Chinese primary school teachers and students are expected to deliver the desired results for the schools.

All parents interviewed agreed that the Chinese primary schools are particularly strong in producing students who excel in mathematics and science. This was one of the main reasons influencing their decision to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools instead of the national primary schools. One of them said,

It is because of the strong learning and academic outcomes in mathematics and science that I have chosen to send my child to

Table 1
Factors influencing the decision of Malay parents to enroll their children in the Chinese primary school (N = 200).

Questionnaire items	Extracted factors and percentage of variance					
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
	41.0	8.65	7.63	6.26	5.24	4.34
<i>Achieving better learning and academic outcomes</i>						
1. My child will learn science better	0.83					
2. My child will attain better academic performance	0.83					
3. My child will learn mathematics better	0.78					
4. My child will be more disciplined in learning	0.71					
5. My child will respect the teachers more	0.67					
6. Chinese primary school is traditionally strong in academic excellence	0.62					
7. Chinese primary school gives a great deal of emphasis to the students' academic achievement	0.58					
8. My child will learn harder	0.57					
<i>Quality of teaching</i>						
1. Chinese primary school teachers give a great deal of emphasis to class discipline		0.82				
2. Chinese primary school teachers are firm in carrying out their teaching duties		0.82				
3. Chinese primary school teachers give a lot of exercises and homework		0.81				
4. Chinese primary school teachers are more dedicated toward teaching		0.74				
5. Chinese primary school teachers are good at teaching mathematics		0.64				
6. Chinese primary school teachers are good at teaching science		0.64				
<i>General strength of the school</i>						
1. Chinese primary school has better school facilities			0.89			
2. Chinese primary school has better school administration			0.83			
3. Chinese primary school has better school discipline			0.73			
<i>Instrumental value of the Chinese language</i>						
1. The Chinese language has great economic value following the emergence of China as a global economic power				0.84		
2. My child could easily find future employment if he/she is proficient in the Chinese language				0.81		
3. The acquisition of the Chinese language could help my child's career				0.79		
<i>Strengthening inter-ethnic relations</i>						
1. My child will be more tolerant toward ethnic differences					0.73	
2. My child will be more open-minded in fostering inter-ethnic relationships					0.72	
3. My child will be able to interact positively with students from other races					0.66	
<i>Learning the Chinese language and culture</i>						
1. My child will be able to pick up the Chinese language						0.85
2. My child will be able to understand Chinese culture						0.84

Note: Total percentage of variance = 73.1 percent.

the Chinese primary school. The national primary school seems to be weak in this area. It is the manner in which the two subjects are being taught that makes the difference. In the case of mathematics, I notice that my child is often asked to do a lot of exercises. I believe that it is through constant drilling and persistent efforts that mathematical skills are finally acquired and it is not so much about innate talent or ability.

Indeed, it is often argued by many people that the Chinese primary school students have a very firm grounding in science and mathematics – a feat that students from other types of primary schools are unable to match. Statistics from University Malaya – Malaysia's top public university, showed that almost all first class honors winners in mathematics came from the Chinese primary schools (Tan, 1984).

Table 2
Item reliability of extracted factors (N = 200).

Extracted factor	No. of items	Cronbach alpha coefficient
F1: achieving better learning and academic outcomes	8	0.924
F2: quality of teaching	6	0.908
F3: general strength of the school	3	0.895
F4: instrumental value of the Chinese language	3	0.836
F5: strengthening ethnic relations	3	0.710
F6: learning Chinese language and culture	2	0.729
Total	25	0.937

The assessment culture upheld by the Chinese primary schools is strongly facilitated by a conducive learning environment that stems from the strict discipline imposed on the students. Many parents interviewed singled out the high level of discipline among the Chinese primary school students as a key contributing factor to better learning and academic outcomes. According to one of them,

The Chinese primary schools do not compromise on the students' discipline. Stern actions are taken against those who go against the school rules and regulations to the extent that there is a tacit understanding among the students that they will not get away from any form of misbehaviors in school, especially during classroom instruction. One important area in which the Chinese primary schools put a lot of emphasis into is to instill among the students a high level of respect for their teachers. This has allowed teachers to conduct their classroom instruction without interruptions from the students. Thus, there is an orderly atmosphere as far as classroom instruction is

Table 3
Pearson inter-correlations between extracted factors (N = 200).

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
F1	1.00	0.629**	0.501**	0.498**	0.527**	0.299**
F2		1.00	0.526**	0.406**	0.411**	0.221**
F3			1.00	0.194**	0.486**	0.190**
F4				1.00	0.324**	0.292**
F5					1.00	0.295**
F6						1.00

** $p < 0.01$.

concerned. It is within this orderly atmosphere that the students have benefited from classroom instruction.

However, according to one administrator, efforts to tighten school discipline have become increasingly difficult following the decision by the Ministry of Education to prohibit corporal punishment for misbehaviors except by a small group of discipline teachers authorize to do so. This has put the Chinese primary schools in a predicament as corporal punishment, especially caning, has traditionally been used by teachers to punish misbehaviors among the students. The difficulty to tighten school discipline is further compounded by the predominance of female teachers in the Malaysian teaching profession (the Malaysian teaching profession fails to attract more male teachers primarily because of the thriving private sector which offers better monetary benefits). It is generally the case that female teachers are softer in dealing with misbehaviors among students as compared to male teachers. Despite the prohibition, Chinese primary schools continue to allow teachers to mete out corporal punishment on students but they are cautioned not to be excessive as it was meant to deter misbehaviors and not to inflict unnecessary pain. According to one teacher:

Punishment meted out to the students has become largely symbolic nowadays. Nevertheless, it is still important that students must be reminded of whatever mistakes committed by them otherwise they will keep on repeating the same mistakes. I strongly believe that punishment is a necessary process of learning, though the prohibition by the Ministry of Education has resulted in some teachers hesitant to mete out any form of punishment.

Our findings on the dominant factor influencing the decision of Malay parents in this sample to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools largely echo the views expressed by Tan (2002) and Lee (2004) on non-Chinese enrollment in Chinese primary schools. Tan notes that non-Chinese parents who enroll their children in Chinese primary schools are of the views that these schools are well run, students are subjected to strict discipline and achieve good academic results. In other words, the Chinese primary schools are considered by them as good schools where children receive a good education. Meanwhile, Lee argues that the main attraction of Chinese primary schools for the non-Chinese is their reputation for discipline and quality of teaching compared with those of the national primary schools as well as the general consensus that subjects such as science and mathematics are better taught in the Chinese primary schools.

3.2. Learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction

Performance in school examinations is an important indicator to evaluate the effectiveness of the students' learning processes. This is even more so in the Malaysian educational system which is highly examination-oriented. Our findings from the questionnaire survey reveal that the Malay students in this sample did not perform well in their latest term examinations – almost all of them were at the bottom half of their classes. Such a lackluster performance was even more alarming given that most of them were from the weaker classes. Only a small group of students (about 10 percent) managed to perform well. Interestingly, according to one informant, this small group of students has siblings who are also studying in the same school. It appears that this has benefited their learning processes.

The main reason for the lackluster academic performance of the Malay students in this sample is their lack of proficiency in the medium of instruction which has impeded their learning processes. Our findings from the questionnaire survey reveal

Table 4

t-Test for general attitude toward learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction ($N = 200$).

Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Mean difference	t value	df	p value
Male	88	3.9409	1.27727	-0.53409	-3.090	198	0.02
Female	112	4.4750	1.12662				

Note: $p < 0.05$.

that 92 percent or 184 students agreed that they were unable to study effectively through the Chinese-medium of instruction. This finding indicates that there is a serious problem of language barrier among the students. In other words, their lack of proficiency in the Chinese-medium of instruction has become a stumbling block to their learning processes. This is rather unfortunate as the medium of instruction is supposed to be a tool that facilitates and not deters the learning processes. It is not surprising then that our findings also reveal that the general attitude of students in this sample toward learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction was only slightly positive with a mean score of 4.24. The general attitude was measured by a 5-item scale rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The 5-item scale includes: "I like learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction", "I enjoy learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction", "If given a choice, I would not want to learn through the Chinese-medium of instruction", "I have no interest at all to learn through the Chinese-medium of instruction" and "I feel bored learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction". The internal consistency of the 5-item scale was high, as indicated by the Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.909. However, there was a significant difference in general attitude between female and male students. The attitude of female students toward learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction was far better than male students ($t = -3.090$, $df = 198$, $p = 0.02$) (see Table 4).

This finding is in fact influenced by the better proficiency of female students in the Chinese-medium of instruction. It is generally true that female students are more successful in learning languages than male students. It is perhaps for this reason that the learning of languages has often been labeled as a feminine-inclined process (see, for example, Collis and Williams, 1987). In the case of the acquisition of a second language, Gardner (1985) notes that gender differences have been obtained on attitude toward learning the second language and girls tend to demonstrate significantly more positive attitude than boys. Most of the teachers interviewed agreed that female students tended to perform better than male students because of their better language proficiency, though other factors might have also come into play. Nevertheless, going by the mean score of 4.4750, the attitude of female students in this sample was not overly positive to indicate that they were strongly receptive toward learning through the Chinese-medium of instruction.

When the parents in this sample were asked about their children's poor academic performance, many expressed a deep disappointment over their children's inability to cope with the Chinese-medium of instruction, despite their efforts to enroll their children in the Chinese-medium kindergarten prior to entering the Chinese primary schools. In fact, our questionnaire survey shows that 73.5 percent or 147 students in this sample had attended the Chinese-medium kindergarten. But these parents were seemingly unaware that such an intervening measure could only allow their children to acquire the BICS but not the CALP of the Chinese language. More importantly, most of the parents in this sample did not come from the Chinese primary schools and as such, they could not provide the much needed parental inputs as far as their

children's learning processes were concerned. This is most unfortunate as many studies have shown that parental inputs are crucial to the children's learning processes in the formative schooling years (see, for example, Trusty, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Butler-Por, 1987; Davis-Kean, 2005; Quah et al., 1995). Also, not many parents in this sample have taken the extra measure to send their children to private tuition classes to enhance their learning processes. Our data show that only 33.5 percent or 67 students had attended private tuition classes in subjects such as the Chinese language, mathematics and science. As for the rest, they were deprived of such an extra avenue that could have given them a chance to overcome their learning difficulties. It is important to note here that private tuition classes play a significant role in helping the learning processes of weaker students in Malaysia. The effectiveness of these private tuition classes lies in the fact that students are given better attention as compared to classroom teaching in schools (see Bray, 2009). Classroom teaching in the Malaysian schools is severely hampered by the overcrowding of students. This problem arises from the democratization of education or the massification of education in which it has become mandatory for parents to enroll their children upon reaching primary schooling age. As such, weaker students are often not given the much needed attention by teachers who find it difficult to cope with the class size. Despite the transformation of classroom learning from the teacher-centred learning approach to the student-centred learning approach espoused by the *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah* (KBSR) or the New Primary School Curriculum implemented in the early 1980s, teachers continued to rely on the teacher-centred learning approach primarily because of the failure of the Ministry of Education to reduce the average class size (Tan, 2012a). Such a top-down learning approach does not provide much room for students' voices and weaker students tend to be marginalized in the instructional process.

Surprisingly, despite the poor academic performance, not many parents in this sample have acted to move their children to the national primary schools. For those parents whose children are in the early grades, they harbor hope that their children will pick up in due course. But such a wait-and-see attitude may not work out well for their children eventually. As one administrator put it,

It is true that most Malay students have a slow start in their learning processes and only pick up when they are into the higher grades. But by then, it is too late as many of them are stuck at the weaker classes and suffer the devastating pulling-down effect on their learning processes, despite efforts by the school to conduct extra classes for them after school hours and during the school holidays. It is indeed difficult for them to get out of this pathetic learning situation.

The pulling-down effect noted by this particular administrator is in fact the direct consequence of streaming or tracking adopted by the Malaysian schools in which students are assigned to classes based on their academic abilities. Following such a stratified system of grouping students, weaker students are deprived of learning inputs and role models from better students. Also, these students may face the possibility of succumbing to "stereotype vulnerability" (Steela, cf. Caldas and Bankston, 1997, p. 270) as a result of being labeled as weaker students. The negative impact of such a label in reinforcing the internal beliefs of underachieving students is succinctly captured by Rist (2007):

The crux of the labeling perspective lies not in whether one's norm violating behavior is known but in whether others decide to do something about it. Further, if a label is applied to the individual, it is posited that this in fact causes the individual to become that which he is labeled as being (p. 77).

All the teachers interviewed agreed that most of the Malay students in this sample were unable to cope with the Chinese-medium of instruction and some even questioned the rationale underpinning the decision of the Malay parents to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools. One of them said,

It is a pity that most of the Malay students cannot write and read effectively in the Chinese language. Their vocabulary in the Chinese language is rather limited and this has hampered their learning processes. The main problem is that there are very limited avenues for them to improve their proficiency in the Chinese language. They do not speak the language at home, except those who have siblings studying in the same school. There are hardly any Chinese reading materials at home. By relying on the limited hours in school, this is certainly not enough for them to pick up the language to a desired level. I think the national primary school is a better learning avenue for them as they do not have to grapple with the problem of language barrier. While the Malay parents who enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools have high expectations that the Chinese primary schools will spur their children to learn, it is unfortunate that their children are not in a strong position to capitalize on the learning and academic strengths that the Chinese primary schools are particularly noted for.

The inability to cope with the Chinese-medium of instruction was clearly illustrated by a student:

I cannot really follow the classroom instruction. Some of the terms used by the teachers are too difficult for me to understand. Also, they speak so fast that I hardly have time to organize my thoughts. I am at a loss most of time. Going by the way things are shaping up, it looks like I may have to struggle through my schooling process. It is indeed tough for me to learn through the Chinese-medium of instruction. If this learning situation does not improve, I am worried that I may eventually lose interest in my studies.

Our interview findings reveal that teachers had resorted to code-switching in an attempt to help the Malay students and such an intervening measure was well-received by the Malay students. Unfortunately, they could not resort to code-switching more regularly. As one teacher put it,

It is not possible for us to resort to code-switching all the time. This is because code-switching tends to delay the teaching process and we may not be able to cover the subject syllabus at the end of the day. Although we do realize that the Malay students are unable to follow our lessons, we have no choice but to proceed with our teaching. The problem lies in the fact that we have to abide by a centralized curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education which is so overcrowded with factual content that more often than not, we are hard pressed to cover the subject syllabus and failure to do so will have an adverse effect on the students' performance in examinations, especially public examinations. Our job is further compounded by the large number of students in our classes which make it extremely difficult for us to provide individual attention to the Malay students.

The two subjects that the Malay students in this sample face immense learning difficulties are: the Chinese language (apart from being the main medium of instruction, the Chinese language is also being taught as a language subject in the Chinese primary schools) and science. Our questionnaire survey reveals that out of 200 students, 92 percent or 184 students identified the Chinese language as the most difficult subject and 46.5 percent or 93

students identified science as the second most difficult subject. In the case of the Chinese language, the Malay students faced extreme difficulty in acquiring the writing skills – many of them were unable to put their thoughts into writing. Meanwhile, in the case of science, they faced extreme difficulty in understanding scientific terminologies. In both cases, their learning processes were hampered by their lack of CALP in the Chinese language. Perhaps, the problems of acquiring the Chinese language among the Malay students need further elaboration here. The Chinese language, being a non-phonetic script, has a complex linguistic structure. It is made up of characters that are formed by strokes and radicals that give no apparent clue to the pronunciation and as such, the characters need to be learnt by heart. The complex linguistic feature of the Chinese language also includes its various pitch levels (tones) to indicate different lexical items. Yet another complex linguistic feature of the Chinese language is the existence of a large number of homophones, i.e., words with similar sounds but different meanings (see Wong, 1992; Yow, 2006). All these complex linguistic features have compounded the learning processes of the Chinese language, especially among those who learn the language as a second language.

Despite the poor academic performance, the Malay students in this sample did not show any mistrust toward the schools, teachers and their Chinese classmates for their underachievement. In fact, their attitude toward the roles played by the schools, teachers and their Chinese classmates in helping their learning processes was positive. Their attitude toward the school authorities were measured by a 4-item scale rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The 4-item scale includes: “The school authority conducts extra classes for the Malay students”, “The school authority understands the learning problems faced by the Malay students”, “The school authority encourages the Malay students to strive for academic excellence” and “The school authority regards the Malay students as low-performing students”. The mean score of the 4-item scale was 4.6912 and the internal consistency of the scale was fairly high with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.711. Meanwhile, the attitude of the Malay students toward the teachers was measured by a 6-item scale rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The 6-item scale includes: “My teachers always help me to learn”, “My teachers hardly help me to learn”, “My teachers give more attention to the Chinese students”, “My teachers give more attention to the Malay students”, “My teachers understand the learning problems faced by the Malay students” and “My teachers regard the Malay students as low-performing students”. The response to the 6-item scale yielded a mean score of 4.6233 and the internal consistency of the 6-item scale was high with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.8031. Finally, the attitude of the Malay students toward their Chinese classmates was measured by a 4-item scale rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The 4-item scale includes: “My Chinese classmates are willing to help me resolve my learning problems”, “My Chinese classmates hardly help me resolve my learning problems”, “My Chinese classmates do not care to respond to my request for help” and “My Chinese classmates belittle my learning ability”. The mean score of the 4-item scale was 4.5762 and the internal consistency of the 4-item scale was fairly high with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.7211. From the foregoing, it is clear that the Malay students in this sample did not encounter the “minority effect” (see Hutchison, 2009) as far as discriminative treatments against their schooling processes in the Chinese primary schools were concerned, despite the fact that minority schooling has often been a complex and contentious issue (see Butera and Levine, 2009; Lewis, 2008) arising from the contestation of “group differences in power” (Yetman, 1991, p. 10) that underpins majority-minority relations.

In sum, it is safe to conclude that the Malay students in this sample could not live up to the high expectations of their parents

as far as their learning and academic outcomes are concerned. There are ill-prepared to learn through a second language and this has retarded their learning processes, despite intervening measures by the school authorities. Their learning processes are further compounded by the lack of parental inputs as well as the limited use of code-switching by teachers. There is thus a clear discrepancy between the desired outcomes and the actual outcomes as far as their learning processes are concerned.

3.3. Fostering inter-ethnic friendship patterns

To explore inter-ethnic friendship patterns of the Malay students in this sample, we asked them to list down their best friends in school. Out of 200 students, only 16.5 percent or 33 students listed Chinese students as their best friends in school. This finding clearly indicates the dearth of inter-ethnic friendships between the Malay and Chinese students in this sample. We have also asked the Malay students four questions rated on a 6-point Likert scale regarding their willingness to foster inter-ethnic friendships: “I like to interact with the Chinese students”, “I feel awkward interacting with the Chinese students”, “I only interact with the Malay students” and “I am not sure any of the Chinese students will become my close friend”. This 4-item scale shows a fairly high internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.712. It yielded a mean score of 4.186, indicating a slightly positive stand on the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships. Many students interviewed admitted that they were unable to transcend ethnicity in the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships, despite the general belief that “children begin school with few indelible prejudices” (Donoghue and Kunkle, 1979, p. 9). As one of them put it,

I do not think it is possible for me to have a close friend from among the Chinese students. We can only become ordinary friends but not beyond that. This is because we are from different ethnic backgrounds and do not share the same culture and religion.

In fact, the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships is made more difficult by the rise of ethnic awareness within the school, especially in relation to Islamic practices of the Malay students (all Malays are Muslim in Malaysia). This is most evident as far as school attire and the consumption of food are concerned. In the case of school attire, female Malay student wears the *baju kurung* (a long tunic that covers the arm) over long navy blue skirt with head scarf in accordance with Islamic dress codes which put a great deal of emphasis on the covering of women’s *aurat* (the part of the body that should not be exposed) (see Frisk, 2009). While it is certainly the basic right of female Malay students to put on attire that adheres to Islamic dressing codes, such dressing codes have, nevertheless, become a distinct identity marker that heightens the self-other distinction. In the case of food consumption, separate stalls in the school canteens are operated for the Malay students who only consume *halal* food, i.e., food prepared in accordance with Islamic dietary law (see Fischer, 2008). Again, this has heightened ethnic differences.

Prior to the 1970s, it was neither mandatory for female Malay students to wear the *baju burung* in schools nor for schools to operate different canteen stalls to accommodate the presence of a minority group of Malay students. But things changed from the 1970s as a result of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia that culminated in the Malays taking extra measures to uphold Islamic practices. The rise of Islamic resurgence was, among other things, a response to increased modernization that had eroded the religious values of the Malays. It culminated in the heightening of awareness among the Malays to conform to the Islamic way of life, including clothing,

food and male and female relationships, to avoid a further erosion of their religious practices (Muzaffar, 1987). Malay religious awareness was further accentuated by the assertive role played by Islamic *dakwah* (missionary) movements beginning in the mid-1970s (Nagata, 1980). The success of the 1978 Iranian Islamic Revolution provided yet another impetus to the rise of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia (Frisk, 2009). The implementation of Islamization programs by the Malay-dominated government beginning in the 1980s had also led to the rise of Islamic resurgence (Muzaffar, 1987; Stauth, 2002). All this has had a catalytic effect on the heightening of Islamic awareness among the Malays in the country.

For one thing, this heightening of Islamic awareness has widened the ethnic divide between the Chinese and Malay students and restricted the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships. As one teacher put it bluntly,

Even before the students start to interact, they are well aware of their ethnic differences. Although the students, are told to respect these ethnic differences, especially religious differences, the fact remains that these differences have the built-in propensity that impedes inter-ethnic interactions.

Alarmingly, according to one informant,

There is an emerging trend among the religious teachers [teachers who are assigned to teach Islamic Studies as a subject in the Chinese primary schools] to constantly remind the Malay students to avoid non-*halal* food in the school canteen. While there is nothing wrong with such an emerging trend from the religious point of view, it, nevertheless, is a stern reminder to the Malay students that they are different from the Chinese students in terms of religious practices. More importantly, the emphasis on such differences has resulted in the Malay students regarding the Chinese students as an out group that does not share their religious beliefs. This has a negative impact as far as the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships is concerned.

Indeed, the difficulty to transcend ethnicity in the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships has been a long-standing problem in Malaysia and this has been well-illustrated by many studies. Santhiram (1995), for instance, notes that the predominant friendship pattern among multiethnic school children in Malaysia was that students from different ethnic backgrounds did not mix and that they used racial distinctions extensively in their relationships. Similar friendship patterns have also been illustrated by the study conducted by Jamil et al. (2004) on ethnic interaction among secondary school students, though the study has also concluded that students have learnt to tolerate other ethnic groups and cross-ethnic conflicts have not reached worrying proportion. But inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia are compounded by the fact that the Islamic way of life is not confined to the private spaces of the Muslim-Malays but has infiltrated into the multiethnic public spaces, including the schools. This is inevitable as Islam is a religion that upholds its practices as "a way of life" (*ad-deen*) (see Frisk, 2009) that covers the private and public spaces. As Nasr (2007[1993]) puts it, Islam is a religion that embraces all the facets of human life.

One important finding that has emerged from our interviews was that intra-ethnic friendship patterns among the Malay students had become more predominant over the years. This has a lot to do with the increasing number of Malay students enrolled in the Chinese primary schools. According to one teacher,

Previously when there was only a small group of Malay students, these students had no choice but to befriend the Chinese students so that their schooling processes would not be

in jeopardy. But now, their numbers have increased markedly to the extent that they have acquired a sizeable threshold within the school domain. This sizeable threshold has provided them a comfort zone for mutual reliance and reduced the need to befriend the Chinese students.

The above finding is not entirely surprising. Indeed, numerical strength such as absolute numbers and concentration is a key factor that helps to sustain the vitality of ethnic groups within the context of inter-group contact. This has been recognized by many scholars, especially those writing on ethnolinguistic vitality (see Giles et al., 1977; Liebkind, 1999).

One possible way to transcend the ethnic divide in the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships is through task-related activities. In fact, our findings from the questionnaire survey reveal that 43.0 percent or 86 Malay students did not mind choosing Chinese students as their learning partners. Although the figure is not convincingly high, it, nevertheless, is a positive indication that the Malay students are willing to engage with the Chinese students in their learning processes. Also, as previously mentioned, the Malay students in this sample have shown positive perceptions toward the learning inputs rendered by their Chinese classmates. This goes to show that engagement in learning activities could help to transcend the divisive effect of ethnicity. It is within this context that the school authorities could initiate some kind of task-related activities that aim at integrating the Malay and Chinese students. Unfortunately, while some of the administrators interviewed hailed the presence of Malay students in the Chinese primary schools as an opportunity to foster inter-ethnic friendships, there were apparently no concrete measures or special programs designed to realize this opportunity. Perhaps, the cooperative learning approach posited by DeVillar and Faltis (1994) could be one possible way to realize this opportunity within the context of classroom instruction. In short, the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships is only possible if there is a convergence of interests that could help to transcend ethnicity. Such a possibility should not be ruled out if we subscribed to the concept of ethnicity postulated by the situationalists (also known as the instrumentalists or circumstantialists) (see, for example, Barth, 1969; Nagata, 1974, 1981; Eriksen, 2002; Fenton, 2010; Tan, 1988; Sanders, 2002). In contrast to the primordialists who associate ethnicity with distinctive and inherited cultural attributes that serve as identity markers (see, for example, Geertz, 1963), the situationalists associate ethnicity with ethnic boundaries or the social spaces within which cross-group interactions take place. To them, "ethnic identity is never a fixed entity for it is subjectively always in a dynamic state, being constantly influenced by the individuals' experience of social interaction" (Tan, 1988, p. 4). The fluidity of ethnic boundaries has thus presented the opportunity for the narrowing of the ethnic divide through interactions that could build on similar interests within a social space.

4. Conclusion

Malay enrollment in Chinese primary schools has become an emerging trend in the educational development of Malaysia. Parental choice of schooling, learning processes and inter-ethnic friendship patterns are three perennial issues within the context of this emerging trend. This study shows that the decision of the Malay parents to enroll their children in the Chinese primary schools is largely underpinned by their expectations that such a choice of schooling would bring about better learning and academic outcomes for their children. Indeed, the Chinese primary schools in Malaysia are noted for their strong commitment to an assessment culture that has become a much cherished school

ethos. Such a commitment is facilitated by their adoption of two learning approaches, i.e., effortful and respectful learning, among their students. These two pedagogical approaches have distinctive cultural bases that are rooted in the Confucian approach to learning (see Kennedy and Lee, 2008; He et al., 2011). The emphasis on drilling through exercises and homework forms the core of effortful learning in the Chinese primary schools. The Chinese primary schools in Malaysia subscribe to the popular Chinese saying of “*qin neng bu zhuo*”, which literally means “weaknesses can be overcome through diligence”. In other words, they believe that hard work will lead to academic success. Meanwhile, respectful learning is achieved by instilling among the students a high level of respect for their teachers in accordance with the tradition of the Chinese primary schools that calls upon the students to uphold the virtue of “*zun shi zhong dao*” (respecting the teachers, recognizing their teachings). Such a virtue could be traced to the popular Confucian saying which holds that: “if some one taught you as a teacher for one day, you should respect him as your father for the rest of your life” (cf. He et al., 2011, p. 79).

Apart from these learning features, the Chinese primary schools in Malaysia are also noted for their strong emphasis on behavioral reform through punishment for violations of school discipline in order to ensure that students do not deviate from their learning processes. Thus, despite the prohibition by the Ministry of Education, the Chinese primary schools continue to allow teachers to mete out corporal punishment. However, teachers are reminded not to be excessive in meting out the punishment. Again, behavioral reform is in line with the Confucian approach to learning (see Kennedy and Lee, 2008). There are of course contrasting views on punishment as a means to spur the students' learning processes. For instance, from the educational perspective, the emphasis is put on initial prevention as a means to avoid punishment. But from the behavioral perspective, punishment is often regarded as one of the important measures to force positive reinforcement of desired behaviors. As Babad (2009) puts it, “advocating that punishment should not be used at all in education is a ridiculous notion and an impossible demand” (p. 145). He further reiterates that, “educators should think and plan how to use punishment in the most educational and productive way and how the educational disadvantages of punishment can be reduced or avoided” (p. 145).

Unfortunately, the Malay students enrolled in the Chinese primary schools are unable to live up to the high expectations of their parents as far as their learning and academic outcomes are concerned. They lack the required proficiency in the Chinese language to facilitate their learning processes – a common problem that comes with learning through a second language. Meanwhile, efforts by the schools to conduct extra classes to enhance their learning processes have not brought about the desired outcomes. Their learning processes are further compounded by the lack of parental inputs and the limited use of code-switching by teachers. For one thing, the Malay parents have deviated from the well-established notion that children learn best through their mother tongues by enrolling their children in the Chinese primary schools. In many ways, the learning problems faced by the Malay students may well be apparent learning difficulties rather than real learning difficulties. Baker (1993) notes that the root causes of apparent learning difficulties may be much less in the students and much more in the school or in the education system. He further stresses that apparent learning difficulties are largely system-generated and school-generated learning problems.

From the perspective of cross-ethnic socialization, this study shows that friendship patterns between the Malay and Chinese students are largely mono-ethnic resulting from a lack of inter-ethnic interactions. While the difficulty to transcend ethnicity is

an inevitable intervening factor, the rise of Islamic awareness has further impeded the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships. In addition, the increased numerical size of Malay students in the Chinese primary schools has created the threshold that works against the fostering of inter-ethnic friendships. But there is an indication that better inter-ethnic interactions could be fostered through intervening measures in which ethnic boundaries could be superseded by the convergence of interests in task-related activities.

In the final analysis, this study clearly shows that the Malay students have not benefited from their schooling processes in the Chinese primary schools. Their learning processes and patterns of cross-ethnic socialization are found to be wanting. To be fair, parents do have the right over their children's choice of schooling. But in exercising such a right, they have to be extremely careful before arriving at a decision, especially if that decision is contrary to normal practices. The case of Malay enrollment in Chinese primary schools shows that the Malay parents are overzealously pursuing an educational pathway that may not bring about the desired outcomes.

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Appendix A

Items designed to extract factors influencing the decision of Malay parents to enroll their children in Chinese primary schools:

Achieving better learning outcome

1. My child will learn science better.
2. My child will attain better academic performance.
3. My child will learn mathematics better.
4. My child will be more disciplined in learning.
5. My child will respect the teachers more.
6. My child will learn harder.

Achieving better academic outcome

1. Chinese primary school is traditionally strong in academic excellence.
2. Chinese primary school gives a great deal of emphasis to the students' academic achievement.
3. Chinese primary school has a good learning culture that stresses on academic excellence.

Quality of teaching

1. Chinese primary school teachers give a great deal of emphasis to class discipline.
2. Chinese primary school teachers are firm in carrying out their teaching duties.
3. Chinese primary school teachers give a lot of exercises and homework.
4. Chinese primary school teachers are more dedicated toward teaching.
5. Chinese primary school teachers are good at teaching mathematics.
6. Chinese primary school teachers are good at teaching science.

General strength of the school

1. Chinese primary school has better school facilities.
2. Chinese primary school has better school administration.
3. Chinese primary school has better school discipline.

Instrumental value of the Chinese language

1. The Chinese language has great economic value following the emergence of China as a global economic power.
2. My child could easily find future employment if he/she is proficient in the Chinese language.
3. The acquisition of the Chinese language could help my child's career.

Strengthening inter-ethnic relations

1. My child will be more tolerant toward ethnic differences.
2. My child will be more open-minded in fostering inter-ethnic relationships.
3. My child will be able to interact positively with students from other races.

Learning the Chinese language and culture

1. My child will be able to pick up the Chinese language.
2. My child will be able to understand Chinese culture.
3. My child will adopt Chinese cultural values.

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