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INTERETHNIC FRIENDSHIP

KNOWING YOU IS LIKING YOU

Children should be encouraged to mix with those from other races

“MAMA, would it be ok if I go play with him?” asked Andi as he pointed at an Indian boy in a restaurant, who was about his age. “Of course you can,” I answered.

“But, he is Indian, boleh ke ma-ma?”

You see, Andi goes to a school in a district heavily populated by Malays. He is, I am afraid, not presented with a lot of opportunities to socialise with non-Malays, and because of that, probably felt apprehensive about doing so.

The lack of intercultural interaction is something I also observe in most of the classes I taught, albeit out of the students' personal choice. Sadly, I often see students consciously or subconsciously segregating themselves in my lecture hall, sitting according to their ethnicities. Not only that, they will hardly do group assignments in a multi-ethnic group, unless I use my veto power. My observation concurs with studies conducted by Prof Dr Ezhar Tamam, an intercultural communication scholar.

Ezhar did a number of studies on interethnic and intercultural relations among students in Malaysian universities. He found that their interactions were structured, formal and regulated. Simply said, very much like what I observed in my lecture hall, he found that students of different cultures and ethnicities usually only interacted with each other if they were required to do so. Socialisation, like going out for teh tarik at mamak stall or watching movies together, was not a norm. Ironically, these were also the same people who, in the questionnaire distributed, viewed interethnic interaction as very important.

I feel that it is such a shame, because I have benefited so much from intercultural relationships. When I was in school, my best friends were mostly non-Malays. Chinese New Year meant going to Min Tsui's house for halal noodles. Deepavali would be Sri Kavi's for scrumptious curry and murruku. I would go for sleepovers at Yeok Cheng's, and she



A kid's drawing at a school in Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with last year's National Day celebration. Intercultural socialisation plays an important role in forming perceptions of people.

would understand that I need to perform solat at a stipulated time and would allocate a place for that.

These interactions have, undoubtedly, made us understand each other and celebrate the diversity that makes us Malaysia. We readily accepted each other's cultural preferences and differences without being judgmental.

Socialisation with friends and people of different cultures, I believe, play an important role in forming perception of people. This reminds me of some interesting findings I unearthed while doing my PhD research. I had the opportunity to interview a few young Malays and asked them about their perception of Chinese and Indians.

They opined that Indians were just like the stereotypes in some of the television programmes they had watched – hot-headed, aggressive at times and demanded respect. Chinese, they said, were very different. On television, Chinese, they said, were gangsters, Ah Longs and DVD peddlers. In real life, they said, Chinese were very good in business and were very respectful of their elders.

What made them believe the stereotypes of Indians? The answer is pretty simple – they have no Indian friends. Because of that, they gathered their information about Indians from the media, which may not be true.

However, they do have a lot of Chinese friends in school, and that enabled them to identify the discrepancy of stereotypical roles in TV programmes. I deduced that the lack of interaction with people of a different ethnicity may cause an individual to build a negative perception of them. Like the saying goes, *tak kenal maka tak cinta* (you can't love what you don't know).

According to American psychologist Gordon Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, the more one interacts with each other, the more they are familiar with each other, and this, in turn, creates understanding. In fact, scholars maintain that intercultural socialisation promotes positive attitude, supports integration and decreases hostile perceptions.

Thus, intercultural friendship should be encouraged among our children and society. However, under some circumstances, one

may not have the opportunity to create a meaningful intercultural relationship. What can we do about it?

In this context, I applaud Harvard University's move in introducing a free online class on religious literacy – Religious Literacy: Traditions and Scriptures – especially in light of the misconceptions about Islam. According to the website, the class aims to give participants a better understanding on the “rich and complex ways that religions function in historic and contemporary contexts”.

Perhaps, it is time we follow suit and create a class, online or not, on interethnic literacy. After all, the ability to tolerate and understand each other is imperative in building a successful multicultural society.

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It has been almost 20 years since the writer left secondary school, but she still has fond memories of the good times she had with her Malaysia friends. She hopes that her children will have the same, if not better, experience and grow up to be caring, understanding and tolerant.

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