Ethnic Relation Across Religion and Culture in Schools: A Narrative Research

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Abstract
Malaysia is a nation of multi-racial society in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah dan Sarawak. Multi-racialism in Malaysia requires a harmonious form of ethnic relations to ensure the nation's solidarity. Therefore, ethnic relations across religion and culture among students is imperative as it is the core that shapes the concept of cultural unity at the preliminary schooling phase. However, previous studies have shown ethnic relations among school students from different religions and cultures to be distant dan unfriendly. This was due to suspicion, ethnocentrism and polarization among others. The objective of this study focuses on the ethnic relations across religion and culture among students in a few secondary schools in the district of Kudat, Sabah. Qualitative method with narrative research data collection was adopted by interviewing 12 experienced teachers as the research informants. Narrative research describes the process of collecting and analyzing stories people are telling about their experiences. The findings indicated excellent ethnic relations across religion and culture among the students. These findings explain the needs to sustain this form of harmonious relationship because it represents the situation for the future Malaysian generations in their efforts to consistently maintain the existing ethnic relations. This study is also imperative because harmonious ethnic relations across religion and culture among students in Sabah can be used as a platform to formulate an effective ethnic relations model that crosses religion and culture within the Malaysian contexts.
Keywords: Ethic Relations, Religion, Culture, Students, Sabah

Introduction
The aspect of inter-ethnic relations is an important element in the effort to form national integration and unity in Malaysia. This is due to the nation's diverse social backdrop in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture in addition to the existence of economic disparity and educational attainment among ethnic groupings (Ahmad & Ab. Hamid, 2015). Different policies of inclusion and acknowledgement adopted by the British towards Malays as the

Bumiputera of the country and non-Malays as immigrants had sharpened racial divide in almost all aspects of life especially after Malaya obtained independence (Abd. Muis, 2012). The government therefore undertook measures to assimilate the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups into Malay society. The policies however were unsuccessful in creating total unity among the three main ethnic races and led to the 13th May 1969 riots. The aftermath of this chaos witnessed the unity agenda becoming a core consideration in all government policies especially those pertaining to education with the focus beginning at primary school level and continuing onwards to secondary school and higher education in both public and private universities since education is perceived as a very effective alternative in uniting an ethnically-diverse society (Saili et al., 2018).

Literature Review
The aspect of ethnic relations is a medium to strengthen the national education policy in the context of national unity, political stability and national development (Saleh et al., 2019). Therefore, the school institution and its environment play a pivotal role in the effort to nurture ethnic relations among students (Husin & Dawi, 2019). Although the existence of various education systems in primary school education had hindered the development process of unity values at early education level, the management of education at secondary school should be a main platform to instil or inculcate these values among students to ensure the implementation and development of patriotism towards a common nation and race in line with the aspirations of national unity in the Malaysia Education Development Plan (2013-2025). Findings by Abu Bakar (2015) which detailed the forms of interaction, factors affecting interaction, and strategies employed by schools to increase student interaction indicate the school's internal and external factors as key determinants in the interaction of students from different ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the students still demonstrated efforts to learn the culture of others and accept ethnic differences.

A study by Nordin et al (2013) on students from diverse ethnicities in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak also indicated that Malay and *Bumiputera* students from Sabah and Sarawak were more inclined towards the assimilation integration model in their social interaction. This could be attributed to the students perceiving the culture of the *Bumiputera* group as more dominant and that all ethnic groups should accept this. This is in contrast to non-*Bumiputera* students who seemed to lean more towards the 'multiple identities' integration model due to their ethnic identity not wholly obliterated as a result of the mutual ethnic dominance factor. Vellymalay (2015) supported the findings of this study and reiterated that the formation of social distance or gap among students from different ethnic groups was determined more by friendship pattern strength according to their own ethnicities. It was also affected by differences in student background, physical separation, level of suspicion, level of trust towards other ethnicities, upbringing and influence of education. This situation created an attitude of high dependency, ease of interaction and mingling among students in the same ethnic groups, strengthening of common values and spirit of unity within the same ethnic circles, and finally differentiating between these group of students with other groups of different ethnicities.

This clearly highlights suspicion among students as among the main challenges in creating inter-religion and inter-culture ethnic relations. A suspicious attitude is irrational hostile behaviour demonstrated by an individual towards certain ethnic clusters as a result of negative experiences with other individuals from those groupings, negative perceptions formed by misunderstanding, negative thinking, stereotyping, and low levels of awareness

(Abd Halim & Awang, 2016; Vellymalay, 2017; Saleh et al., 2019). Vellymalay (2017) explored the implication of culture and religion on the interaction of students of different ethnicities within the classroom setting and found the differences in both aspects to be among factors influencing the formation of prejudices and stereotypes which were detrimental to the classroom interaction of students from different ethnicities. Conflicts also occurred as a result of these different backgrounds. Abdul Khalil et al (2018) reported that conflicts at times emerged due to petty issues such as being penalised by prefects who were of different ethnic groupings.

Yet another challenge to the effort to form inter-religion and inter-culture ethnic relations in schools is the issue of ethnocentrism. This term refers to a belief and pride that one's own ethnicity and culture is superior than those of any other group. This attitude resulted in a group of students feeling entitled to respect and subservience from their peers from other ethnic groups (Saleh et al., 2019). The feeling of entitlement led to them becoming more inclined towards interacting within their own ethnic group (Yusof, 2006; 2012). Similarly, in a study in one *Sekolah Wawasan*, Vellymalay and Murugaiah (2017) found the majority of students to be inclined on interacting with students from their own ethnic group. The prejudice and ethnocentricism among the students led to a significant negative effect on the aspect of unity and at the same time created a learning environment full of conflict and suspicion (Vellymalay, 2017). A backdrop such as this would surely hinder any effort to form inter-religion and inter-cultural ethnic relations in school and foster long-term societal racial unity. This matter was highlighted by Yusof (2012) who stressed that the existence of a high social divide among students of various ethnicities in school necessitated a concrete effort to understand their interaction. Nation building efforts and measures to inculcate and nurture patriotism, citizenship and the spirit of one-race and one-nation integration should be implemented in secondary schools (Ahmad & Ab. Hamid, 2015).

In Sabah, the impact of ethnic tolerance among the multi-ethnic society (Mohd Tamring, 2010) and the use of the national language as the sole medium of interaction in school have produced a positive form of ethnic interaction and in turn produced students with high levels of cooperation and patriotism (Adam, 2019). A study by Anuar et al (2021) on students in Keningau, Sabah supported this finding whereby it was observed that their knowledge and life experiences in their surroundings enabled them to be open and receiving of other ethnic groups. The students' interaction with their friends from a multitude of cultures was not a limited one-way understanding; rather the interaction that occurred was a form of response process with their surroundings and the resultant new experiences. The openness and positive attitude of the students clearly showed that ethnic differences were not obstacles and excuses to forge friendship and cooperation. The students were willing to work together with their peers from other ethnicities during the teaching and learning sessions and school activities.

This scenario was echoed in several secondary schools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah where the students' response to aspects of respecting beliefs, cooperation, togetherness and ease in their interaction with their peers from different religions and cultures was very positive. Students were at ease in interacting, sharing their problems, discussing personal and academic matters, and learning new things with their friends regardless of their ethnicity, religion and culture (Ramlie et al., 2022a). Subsequent studies indicated teachers perceiving the absence of prejudice among students when establishing positive relationships and close interaction with friends from various religious and cultural backgrounds. Analyses of the questionnaire responses found inter-ethnic and inter-culture relations among students as

very positive and encouraging (Ramlie et al., 2022b). This situation was made possible by the high tolerance towards different religions and ethnicity in the aspect of ethnic relations and social interaction adopted by the society in Sabah (Mohad et al., 2015) and among students. This is the unique aspect of multi-ethnic society harmony in Sabah which should be highlighted and emulated to ensure societal harmony in the state specifically and Malaysia in general (Ramlie et al., 2022b). This study therefore was aimed at contributing to the existing literature by exploring the inter-ethnic and inter-culture relations among students of various ethnic backgrounds in several secondary schools in the district of Kudat, Sabah.

Research Methodology

Field work for this study was undertaken when teaching and learning in schools in Malaysia were still in online mode due to the COVID-19 pandemic. No face-to-face observation of any student or school activity could be conducted as a result of the then standard operating procedures in force. This study was therefore structured as a qualitative study and narrative research with interviews conducted both online and face-to-face. The interview method was for the purpose of ascertaining non-tangible occurrences and activities such as the form of inter-religion and inter-culture ethnic relations among the students.

Interviews with the informants were in a wide-ranging and open form which enabled them to share their knowledge and experiences without being bound by time limitations, and ensure the researchers could obtain the necessary information (Jasmi, 2012). The interviews were in-depth since this approach was perceived as more appropriate for the short time allocated compared to joint observations. The in-depth interview technique, two-way conversations conducted in a friendly and informal setting, is suitable in situations where (1) the aspect of focus in the study is clear and succinctly summarised, (2) study subjects cannot be found due to its relation with past events, (3) the researcher is faced with time constraints to the extent that they cannot fully engage in observation, and (4) the researcher is very reliant on humans or large-scale respondent. The critical strength of the interview technique is in its ability to generate data which the researcher might not be able to obtain compared to other methods of data collection with severe time constraints (Jasmi, 2012).

In this study, primary data was obtained by way of interviews while secondary data was generated from library research specifically from past researches on inter-religion and inter-culture relations among students in school. A data collection method comprising primary and secondary data is suitable since the data could then be arranged according to the need to collect as much information as possible to arrive at answers for the research objectives and questions (Darusalam & Hussin, 2016). The study was conducted from 25th May 2021 to 28th May 2021 in several secondary schools in the Kudat district and had as informants 12 teachers with more than 10 years teaching experience. Interview questions were constructed based on the findings of the researcher's past researches (Ramlie, 2022a; Ramlie, 2022b). Since the nature of the interview was in-depth and not bound to structured questions, the findings were not coded according to themes or categories; instead, it was presented as narratives. In other words, this study was more as a conceptual study formed according to findings from the interviews and supplemented with information from past researches for the purpose of validation.

Findings

From the interviews, the inter-religion and inter-culture relations scenario among students in several secondary schools in Kudat is presented below from the perspectives of the individual informants

Informant 1

"The ethnic relations among students, teachers and administrators in the context of inter-culture and inter-religion certainly do not have any emergent issues. In fact, they could mutually adapt and assimilate together to ensure the success of any programme. There are no boundaries among the students. They could interact well whether among themselves or with teachers. Although they are from different ethnicities and cultures, they could still sit down and mingle or play together."

Informant 2

"Student relations is very good. In Sabah, it's unique, we can interact together regardless of our religion or culture. Apart from that, respect towards culture and religion is instilled in every generation of students. For instance, this scenario can be seen when a Muslim student who is fasting remains in the classroom during recess. The non-Muslim students who are not fasting will feel awkward eating at that time. From here, we can see the very high level of mutual respect among them. Ethnic relations among students, teachers and administrators in the context of inter-religion and inter-culture in the Kudat district definitely present no emergent issues. In fact, they adapt and assimilate together to ensure the success of any programme."

Informant 3

"The activities conducted in school involved all parties regardless of their background. There were no challenges because of the good relation between students and teachers and there were no problems in terms of programme implementation since these involved every student irrespective of their background. We only conducted general programmes for all and no programme was based on ethnicity. Recently the school authorities held a breaking of fast programme which involved non-Muslim students. There were no problems or challenges whatsoever. All the activities went well. We never differentiated students from different ethnicities and never implemented activities that were only meant for certain ethnic groups. Any programme will be opened to all students in the school. All programmes will be conducted be it academic or co-curriculum. There is absolutely no programme designed to segregate students."

Informant 4

"There is no difference in the relationship between students of different religions. This does not touch on any sensitive religious sentiment. They are able to interact warmly, learn together, and share knowledge among themselves. Students from different cultures in this school show neither racial nor cultural sentiments. There is mutual respect. They are also knowledgeable of their own culture and the traditions of other races."

Informant 5

"Most of the programmes that involved inter-ethnic relations are co-curriculum in nature. The majority of students in this school are Rungus although there are also Bajau, Suluk and Ubian. We do not differentiate between race and religion; in fact, we encourage all parties to

participate. If they are successful, that's credit to the school. The relationship between teachers and staff in the school are also good. There is no racial sentiment. Whenever there are celebrations like Hari Raya, we encourage all parties to take part and similarly so with other celebrations. We very much encourage inter-race interaction. Parents here are very cooperative and it doesn't cause any problem at all. If they are required to come to school, they are very helpful. The interesting thing here is that most of the community are related and this further strengthens the good relationship between the school and the local community. It can be summarised that the relationship between all parties in this school is very cordial."

Informant 6
"There are no differences in terms of religion whereby the interaction is free. Muslim students are able to mix with those who are non-Muslim and vice versa. We can sit at one table and eat together. The friendship is very close. During Raya celebrations, the non-Muslim students are more excited and enthusiastic to celebrate. They will don clothes that are appropriate for the occasion. Similarly, during the Ka'amatan festivities, the Muslim students are the more excited ones. The Muslim students here really liked donning ethnic costumes due to their exposure to other ethnicities even before coming to this school. Even after the pandemic, religious differences were not seen. Only the interaction was limited. Teachers worked from home and students attended teaching and learning online from home. What I can conclude is, although they were unable to meet, they were still in constant touch with each other. The interaction among them was still close although this was not physical. The students had gotten used to the environment at an early stage. When we talk about culture, no differences could be seen. Although religion and culture are not emphasised, this does not mean that these are disrespected; rather the students have already learnt much earlier how to respect other religions and other cultures at the same time. The students here are very respectful of other races. After the COVID-19 pandemic, several agencies conducted various small-scale activities such as the 'Unduk Ngadau' contest. From what I could observe, the students who responded comprised not only the non-Muslims but also the Muslim students. This means the relationship was still sustained. For programmes that were conducted online or live that limited movement, students would leave comments and provide support irrespective of their religion and ethnicity. We will not witness any religious and cultural differences in this school. They are united in race and spirit."

Informant 7
"The Islam-Christian composition is huge, and similarly with those without religion. What I can conclude about this religious difference is that there are actually no issues except on matters pertaining to food and religious practice. The interaction and thinking are very open. It is only during Islamic Studies and Moral Studies subjects that the students are separated according to their religions. When I was teaching Moral Studies on the topic of racial differences, one of the aspects that was discussed was Muslim and non-Muslim practices. Interestingly, the students were more knowledgeable about the practices of other religions. For example, the Muslim students were aware of the practices of their non-Muslim friends and vice-versa. This type of interaction enabled the easy understanding of certain terms. It cannot be denied that isolated cases can provoke conflict among students of different religions. In Sabah there is no such thing as different cultures. The similarities are very distinct. For instance, in this place there are several Rungus students, in fact there are those from Sarawak and Peninsular

Malaysia. The majority is Rungus but interaction and mixed marriages have turned it into a kind of culture. In this school, problems related to religion seldom occur."

Informant 8
"Most of the students in this school are of Rungus ethnicity; as such the cultural differences are not obvious. Other races like Dusun and Chinese can give and take to the point where we cannot see any difference at all. In my eyes, cultures are similar, able to interact and assimilate. Apart from that, most of them here live in villages or settlements with many races and cultures. So, in school, they are used to this kind of environment. There is absolutely no issue that arise from this. This is because many of the students in this school have family from different religions. Good relations do not give rise to any problem."

Informant 9
"In terms of culture, there is no conflict effects for sure. In fact, during Raya celebrations, the non-Muslim students would visit their Muslim relatives' home. During festivals such as Ka'amatan, they would bring food and eat together. Programmes would go without any hitch. It can be surmised that due to assimilation and the intermingling of various races through marriage, culture becomes somewhat normal. There is mutual respect among them. In terms of religion, I observe that not only in school but also in our own district, there is no situational difference that create tension. Even if there is, it would only be disciplinary cases. But this would be amicably resolved; in fact relations between Muslim and non-Muslim families are very close. Student disciplinary cases do not involve religious matters; these are just infringement offences."

Informant 10
"There really is no issue of religious differences. I feel the students do not bother about religious issues and they interact with sincerity. There is no 'racist' terminology and cases involving religious differences. What can be observed during classroom teaching is that issues on interaction or ethnicity segregation do not arise. This could be due to the emphasis by the teachers in the teaching and learning process of the Civics, Moral and Islamic Studies subjects. The aspect of mutual respect is inculcated. There is also no difference before and after the pandemic. The pandemic did not affect inter-ethnic relations. The mechanism used to encourage student interaction is by introducing many programmes that involve all parties. In those programmes, they interact and exchange opinions, and do sharing on their individual traditions and religious beliefs. The pandemic situation has lessened the inculcation of these values in the programmes. In the division of duties for example, library prefects comprise students from various religions and ethnicities. Although the majority are Rungus, the school authorities will ensure the representation of each ethnic and culture to balance the composition and avoid discrimination of any race and religion. This is similarly with school prefects and hostel prefects. In every committee, it is important to ensure diversity of ethnicity, religion and culture to ensure mutual sustainability. In terms of HEM, religious and race elements are not taken into consideration in the allocation of school aid. It is based entirely on eligibility. In the classroom, we encourage teachers to arrange student seating or group composition that comprise diversity of background. This is the mechanism that we work towards. In co-curriculum distribution, we also encourage mingling to heighten interaction. For example, in our breaking of fast occasion held before this, we suggested that the non-Muslim students should be served the same food as their Muslim peers so that they would not

feel left out. Similarly with the non-Muslim teachers, we invited them to break fast together and join in the programme. We found the relations to be very close and are thankful that no misunderstanding occurred."

Informant 11
'After the COVID-19 pandemic, relations on the part of the school were still strong. During the Ramadhan month, the school authorities through their Islamic Studies teaching panel organised a 'Ihya Ramadhan' programme where all students extended very good cooperation. They were respectful of each other. They also participated in contests such as the Hari Raya card drawing competition. During that time, "usrah' sessions were organised in the hostel hall for Muslim students. Several students showed interest to participate in the activity and see what programmes were being held. This way they could see the event running smoothly and in an organised manner. No untoward incident happened for the entirety of that activity although we were in the midst of a pandemic."

Informant 12
"In my opinion, relations between students of different religions in this school is very good. Their interaction is also very good. We can directly observe that during any activity they will give their utmost cooperation until the programme could be successfully implemented. Many of the implemented programmes involved all parties regardless of race and religion. Student relations is not an obstacle. They are united in their aim for excellence in line with the school motto. The teachers who are from various ethnic and religious backgrounds also are not opposed to the cohesive relation and strong spirit of cooperation."

Based on the interviews, it could be summarised that as a whole, the inter-ethnic and inter-religion ethnic relations scenario among students in several secondary schools in the Kudat district is as follows

1. Student, teacher and administrator ethnic relations in the context of inter-culture and inter-religion is very good and does not have any emergent issues. Students could mutually adapt and assimilate together to ensure the success of a programme.
2. There is no boundary among students because they could integrate well, study together and share knowledge among themselves. Although they are of different ethnicities and religions, they could still sit together at a common table and play together.
3. The mechanism applied by the school authorities to encourage student interaction is by conducting various programmes involving all parties regardless of their background. Schools never differentiated students according to their ethnicity and never implemented activities that were targeted for certain ethnic groups only. Programmes, whether academic or co-curriculum, would be open to all students. No programme that segregated students was organised. In the division of duties for instance, teacher and student committees would be comprised of various religions and ethnic groups. School authorities would ensure that each ethnicity and culture was represented to avoid discrimination of any one race and religion. Therefore, in the programmes that were held, students would mingle and exchange ideas and do sharing on their traditions and religious beliefs. Students demonstrated strong cooperation to ensure the successful completion of programmes.

4. Religious and race elements are not taken into consideration in the distribution of aid in school; this is instead purely based on eligibility. In the classroom, teachers ensured that seating arrangements or student groupings would comprise various ethnic backgrounds.

5. Students from different cultures did not show racial or cultural sentiments. They were respectful of each other. The students were conversant of the ways, traditions and cultures of the races in their class and familiar with celebrations associated with other cultures. Whenever there were celebrations such as Hari Raya and other celebrations, the school authorities would encourage all parties to get involved.

6. Most of the students lived in villages or settlements that had diverse race and culture compositions. Therefore, when they come to school, they are already familiar with this type of environment. There is absolutely no issue since many of the students have family members of different religions. Assimilation and the mixing of various races through marriage moulded the students to become respectful of others. Their parents are very cooperative and do not create any problem. If the parents are requested to come to school, they would willingly do so.

7. The Muslim and Christian compositions are large, and similarly those without any religion. However, this religious difference does not give rise to any issues except with regards to food and religious practice. The students do not bother about religious issues and they mingle with sincerity. No racist terminology exists in disciplinary cases involving different religions since these cases do not involve religious matters but are more on rule infringements. Religious and cultural differences are not emphasised although this does not mean students are disrespectful; rather it is because it has been instilled in the students from earlier on to be respectful of other religions and cultures since they are one in race and spirit.

8. The interaction and way of thinking is also very open and the issue of choosing to mingle with their own ethnic group does not arise. It is only during Islamic Studies and Moral Studies that the students are segregated according to their religions. However, it is interesting to note that students are more conversant about the practices of other religions. For example, Muslim students are aware of the religious practices of their non-Muslim peers, and vice-versa. It cannot be denied that isolated cases that give rise to arguments among students of different religions do occur, but it is seldom that the conflicts are related to religion.

9. The pandemic that occurred did not leave any effect on ethnic interaction. After the COVID-19 pandemic, relations were still strong among the students. Teachers who were comprised of many ethnicities and religions also did not prevent interaction and the forming of a cohesive spirit of cooperation.

Conclusion
The foundations for strong cohesive ethnic relations at school level must be strengthened so that these become internalised in students and create resilient Malaysians moving forward towards collective unity. Students who remain within their own cocoon of ethnic understanding and interaction should be continuously encouraged to widen their space without any negative perceptions towards other students. It is hoped that the scenario of inter-religion and inter-ethnic harmony among the students in Sabah in this study could become a platform to push forward school activities with participation of those from various

religious and cultural backgrounds without side lining issues of sensitivity so as to ensure the aspect of understanding and awareness of diversity in school remains consistent.

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