

Coping Mechanism of Non-Chinese Families in Chinese Primary Schools in Sarawak

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A team of lecturers from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak successfully carried out their study on “Coping Mechanism of Non-Chinese Students and Families in Chinese Primary Schools in Sarawak” this year. Although their research plan was interrupted and fieldwork could not proceed as planned due to the pandemic unrest, the team managed to interview a total of 267 non-Chinese students, 164 non-Chinese parents and 91 teachers. Eight semi rural schools in Sematan, Asajaya, Sarikei and Meradong districts were visited and face to face interview were conducted. The eight schools were selected based on their significant proportion of more than 60% non-Chinese students.

The collaborative research project between UNIMAS with Sarawak Cultural Research Institute Society and Association of the Boards of Management of Aided Chinese Primary Schools in Kuching, Samarahan and Serian Divisions aims to identify the strategies used by non-Chinese students and their parents in coping with studying in a Chinese environment. Permission for the project was also granted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia and Sarawak Education Department.

The preliminary findings from this study indicate that non-Chinese parents are not deterred from sending their children to Chinese primary schools despite the language barrier, the heavy load of homework and the frequent continuous assessments. Even when there are other school options within close vicinity to their longhouse and village, non-Chinese parents are still keen in sending their children to Chinese primary schools. Most of the parents are hopeful that by acquiring Chinese language competency, their children will have better job prospects. Parents also believe that teachers in Chinese primary schools are very strict and their children will be better disciplined. Parents believe if their children are better discipline from young in school, they will not have much disciplinary problems when they go to secondary schools.

Parents are convinced that if their children are exposed to Chinese culture which places a lot of emphasis on diligence and hard work, their children will be become good adults in future. The beautiful school landscape which is well maintained and always clean, and other infrastructures such as covered multipurpose hall, airconditioned classrooms, basketball courts are also the draws for parents to send their children to Chinese primary schools.

Parents also proudly say that in future when their children apply for jobs, their Chinese names would be an added merit. In SJKC, names of non Chinese students are portrayed on their name tags in dual languages. For example, 安得力 (Andrister), Aaron (亚伦), 艾丽那 (Nur Ariana), 杰马尔 (Jamal), 欧文(Erwin), 阿兹祖 (Azizul), 卡蒂加 (Kartika), 瑞恩(Ryan), 菲奥娜 (Fiona), 丹尼斯 (Danish), 阿米尔 (Amirul), 纳兹里曼 (Nazriman). The Chinese names would help to leave an impression on the interviewee or those who screen through the job resumes. Certainly, their children's ability speaking, writing and reading Chinese language is an unequivocal asset in their job prospect, especially for Chinese firms or those dealing with Chinese counterparts.

This study also reveals that non Chinese parents including grandparents are interested in attending Chinese language class for adult learners. Parents and guardians believe by learning some basic Chinese language they can help their children better and acquire a lifelong learning skill that would be useful in their daily lives and at work place.

Although parents appreciate the good moral values and useful language competency their children obtain through Chinese education, majority are not considering sending their children to Chinese secondary schools. The reasons are parents are worried if their children will face more learning difficulties in secondary level especially Chinese language subjects, and they also think Chinese secondary schools will be very costly since there are monthly school fees to pay. As most Chinese secondary schools are found only in bigger towns, they are worried about the transportation problems. However, if boarding facilities it would help greatly. Parents do not rule out the option in sending their children to Chinese secondary schools if their children are doing well in Chinese language subjects and are interested to attend Chinese secondary schools. Parents hope the Chinese secondary schools can provide more information about the boarding facilities, scholarship, student loans.

The feedback from schools about non Chinese parents' cooperation is very positive. All the principals are proud with the 100% cooperation rendered by parents in every activity organized by the school. Language barrier is not an issue at all for parents to show their support in their children's school engagement. Parents would go to the extend of bringing extra items for *gotong royong*, school painting, *keceriaan* activities such as buckets, paint brush, brooms, etc even without being asked to. For example, at SJKC Chung Hien, Sarikei, parents are actively involved

in the school's pineapple farming project. Parents contribute stalks of pineapples and planted them in the allocated plot of land. Parents come by frequently to weed, put fertilizer to maintain the "Kebun Nanas Sekolah" even without being requested by the school. Parents said they are more than happy to participate in the school activities. They get to know the teachers and other parents better. They also get to learn some simple Chinese words from the teachers while doing something useful for the school.

Majority parents are grateful to the dedication of principals and teachers in going extra miles to organize various activities especially the after-school tuition classes. Before the Covid 19 pandemic, tuition classes were held every day for 1 1/2 hour to facilitate in students' learning. Upper primary classes have more frequent after school tuition ranging from 3 to 5 times a week, particularly for Primary 6 students. The tuition classes are free of charge and teachers work very hard to help the students especially non-Chinese students in their homework and overall learning. Parents response positively to these extra classes and try to make sure their children attend the classes each time. As most of the schools visited have no canteen, parents send lunch to their children before the afternoon tuition classes start.

Teachers believe that if parents continuously place great importance in their children's learning, their children will perform well whether Chinese or non-Chinese. Family environment is a very pertinent factor for children to be motivated in learning. Even if parents do not understand the subjects or language, it is not a big issue. The most important thing is parents need to work hand in hand with teachers for the betterment of their children's future. School can provide suitable learning environment with the necessary facilities. Teachers can facilitate students learning through various effective teaching learning methods. Parents can provide the motivation for their children to complete homework, to revise and to try their best in school. It does not take TWO to tango, but all parties must support each other to ensure students learn well.

This preliminary study reveals the importance of every parent's and teacher's aspiration for their children, student to learn well and be better person. No parents from any ethnic or cultural, belief background would compromise on their children's education. They will go extra miles, extra hardship to ensure their children receive good education to become honest and responsible adults.