

# **Historical Overview of Malaysia's Experience in Enhancing Equity and Quality of Education: Focusing on Management and Mediation of Multiethnic Issues**

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## **1. Introduction**

In Malaysia, it is usually considered that the community and population are dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This scenario, according to Boulanger, (1996), is due to the 'tri-ethnic schema' of Malay-Chinese-Indian, which underscores the polarity of ethnic groups and continues to have a decisive influence on macro-level policy and micro-level practice. Within the social and political schema of 'tri-ethnic'- Malaysia, (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) ethnic challenges and bargaining have moulded the formulation and production of education policies in Malaysia since independence.

Ethnic composition is the key to understanding the whole picture of Malaysian economic, political and social patterns. In fact, everything social, political and economic in Malaysia is dominated by the considerations of 'ethnic arithmetic' (Milne, 1967). This concept designates the pattern of the social arrangement, politics, and economy and has helped to shape the Constitution, and influenced the democratic process and the party system (Ratnam, 1965, p.1). In other words, Malaysians are cognisant of their ethnic background and are being constantly reminded of the fact in all social, economic and political transactions in which they are involved.

The different ethnic identities in Malaysian society have also affected the formation of the state and its policy agendas, especially in the education system. This situation has drawn the state into the role of mediating and managing interethnic issues arising from contestation among major ethnic groups for sharing economic, political power and cultural space.

## **2. The Ethnic Diversity in Malaysia**

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, Malaysia was quite homogenous as far as the demographic distribution was concerned. It was a singular society of Malays, the indigenous people. In 1880, they constituted about 90% of the population in Peninsular Malaysia (Gullick, 1969). During the British colonial rule, from 1874 to 1957, there was significant transformation of the Malaysian population. The British, through their policy of encouraging migration, especially from China and India, changed the nature of this relatively ethnically homogenous society to a more pluralistic society. This thus transformed the Malaysian society from a largely mono-ethnic society into a multi-ethnic one (Santhiram, 1999).

According to Census 2000, the total population of Malaysia is nearly 23 million of which 21,890 million (95%) are Malaysian citizens. Of the total Malaysian citizen population, the Malays and other indigenous groups (namely Bumiputera or ‘son of the soil’) comprised over 66.1%, the Chinese 25.3% and Indians 7.4% (Malaysia, 2002a). The estimated population in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (RM8) shows the growth of the multiethnic population in Malaysia in 2005, when the Malay will comprise 67.3%, Chinese 24.5% and the Indians 7.2% of the total population (see Table 1).

According to Ratnam (1965), there is no cultural homogeneity in Malaysian society with each ethnic group having their own religion, language, culture and customs. For example, the Malays speak Malay language, another powerful factor in binding the Malays together. No doubt, language is an important rallying point for the Malays, and it has been one of the most sensitive issues in Malaysian politics. The Chinese are the second largest ethnic group bound together by a common culture and heritage. The Chinese community uses a number of dialects including Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese and Mandarin. Even though they are separate linguistic groups and mutually unintelligible orally, for the purpose of education and writing, the Chinese use Mandarin. In this sense, the written language has been one of the important integrating forces amongst the Chinese, besides their common culture and heritage. The Indian community in Malaysia is largely South Indian Tamils, constituting about 85 percent of the total Indian population in Malaysia (Santhiram, 1999). For the Indian society in Malaysia, the language spoken is Tamil. These different ethnic identities have constituted a multi-ethnic or pluralistic nature in Malaysian society.

Table 1: Malaysian Population Growth According to Ethnic Groups 1995 – 2000 (Million)

	1995	%	2000	%	2005	%
Citizen	19.68	100.0	22.04	100.0	24.66	100.0
Total Population	20.68		23.27		26.04	
Malay/Bumiputera	12.47	63.3	14.56	66.1	16.59	67.3
Chinese	5.22	26.5	5.58	25.3	6.04	24.5
Indian	1.49	7.6	1.63	7.4	1.78	7.2
Others	0.50	2.6	0.27	1.2	0.25	1.0
Non-Citizen	1.00		1.23		1.38	

(Source: Malaysia, 2001a, 2002a & 2002b)

The British rulers also created an artificial occupational segregation on ethnic lines (Malay in agriculture, the Chinese in commerce, and Indian in plantation); reinforced a sense of interethnic divisions, economic imbalance, and therefore prohibited any kind of solidarity between these major ethnic groups (Stockwell, 1982; Sarji, 1989; Andaya and Andaya, 2001). Under the Colonial rule, with the injection of major immigrant communities, Furnival (1948)

described the existing society as a unit of disparate parts that ‘...mix but do not combine which each group holds its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways’ (p.313). As a result, there was a relative absence of consensus values, with relative autonomy for the separate parts of the social system, resulting in tension and ethnic conflict (Chan, 1971).

Since the socioeconomic structure of Malaysia before and after independence is ethnically divided, it is not surprising that politics, responding to this reality, is also organised on this basis. Accordingly, the practice of ethnic-based political parties reinforces the distinction of Malaysia’s numerous ethnic communities. In this sense, most of the political parties in Malaysia were mere pressure groups seeking privileges and advantages for their ethnically oriented members (Saad, 1979). They always act as a mediator of ethnic symbols and interests. Till today, ethnic differences have been given a political dimension; thus education issues are also being structured and debated around ethnicity dimensions.

### **3. Equity and Quality of Education - Language issue of different ethnic groups**

In the Malaysian education system, the Chinese and Indian communities have strong sentiments and legacies in relation to mother tongue education. Historically, the mother tongue education for these ethnic minorities has been institutionalised by community involvement and policy practice of the British colonial era. This has continued to structure the education system in post independence Malaysia through political consensus of the political elites of the three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian) in ‘settling’ a national education system for an independent Malaysia.

The present vernacular system at primary level demonstrates the continuous policy practice for accommodating different aspirations of different ethnic groups regarding language in education. However, this context of policy practice has structured different identities in the schooling system, which produced the ethnic character of the schools represented by the language of instruction.

In the context of ethnicity in relation to language in education, considerations of multiculturalism and multilingual medium of instruction in the Malaysian education system seem to be an important means for satisfying the minority ethnic groups’ aspirations in education. This also has been regarded as assisting the state in enhancing equity in education across different ethnic groups in the country. In this sense, issues of equity of education in the Malaysian education sphere are interrelated with discourses about the Chinese and Indian rights to their language in education. Hence, the policy orientation regarding mother tongue and vernacular schools, can be regarded as reflective of the state approach for accommodating the Chinese and Indian aspirations in the Malaysian education system. This is reflected in the politics of policy-making when it comes to mediating the ethnic interests related to language issues and the vernacular schools.

In the Malaysian modern post-colonial society, demand for mother tongue education amongst ethnic minorities is also influenced by discourses concerning human rights in education.

The kind of shift in the discourse related to the mother tongue issue in Malaysian education moves language issues away from the narrow chauvinistic label in language politics. This shift in the discourse on ethnic challenges for mother tongue is influenced by the flow of ideological thought about equality and opportunity in education across the nation. Derived from the notion of rights in education, this aspect has permeated ethnic contestation to a policy that disregards such rights.

#### **4. Malaysian Education Policy Development for Educational Equity and Quality: The Contested Landscape of Multiethnic Issues**

Discourse on ethnic challenges derived from the ethnic responses to such policies in the education system aimed at integrating the nation. The contradictions and tension between the state ideology and the ethnic minority stand point on education were rooted in the tension between dominant hegemony and the multi-cultural nature of Malaysian society. This conflict of ideas about equity in education is a contested terrain (to use Ozga's (2000) term) between the ethnic minority in preserving their cultural and language identities with the dominant aspiration of the ethnic majority to enhance their culture and social status in the process of nation building.

The ethnic challenges towards education policy in Malaysia exist and are marked by the competitive discourses of language, culture and identity, and are also influenced by the discourse of *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera* or Malay and non-Malay in Malaysian social, political and economic spheres, in and through the policy processes. These ethnic groups' challenges derived from the state ideology in utilising the policy about ensuring the provision of the dominant ideology in Malaysian education policy, and also at enhancing social and economic mobility for the Malay. In this sense, the ideological instrument between 'us' and 'them' (which refers to Malay as the dominant policy producers and the Chinese who have less power in policy production but who have a strong economic position and political bargaining power) influenced the state policy mechanism in preserving the special privilege for the Malay or *Bumiputera* and favoured the dominant ideology of national integration, but on the other hand produced resistance from the significant ethnic minority, the Chinese. This was manifested in policy such as the NEP and other policies related to affirmative action for the ethnic majority, who are considered economically disadvantaged (Jamil, 2008). This indirectly strengthened the continuation of ethnic boundaries, which historically were constructed by the colonial policy practice. Thus, the scenario in this policy process pulled the Malays and non-Malays in different directions and sharpened the subjective feeling of differences between them (Chan, 1971). Such differences are between Malay and non-Malay or *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera* and entwined with being advantaged or disadvantaged in the ethnic contestation within the policy process in education.

The ethnic challenges regarding the policy produced in Malaysian education are rooted in different principles and interests of different ethnic groups in relation to education. While the Malays continue to fight to hold on to their position as the 'sons of the soil', and believe that their language and culture should be the core of national identity, the Chinese and Indian struggle for equality, justice and their rights towards culture and identity. Hence, the non-Malay promotes

different discourses for enhancing equity in education, focused around the notions of equality and non-discrimination. For them, such policy action should also be based on the protection and enhancement of other groups' cultures and identities. Regarding the economic aspect, such affirmative action should be based on the status of the weaker sectors and not ethnically based or based on religious belief. Thus, for them, the social construction of ethnic boundaries in the policy process drawn by the term of *Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera* should be abolished to eliminate such distinctions and discrimination between ethnic groups in Malaysian society (Suqiu Committee, 1999, p. 11).

Although policy production is the state endeavour to promote equity and quality of education, some policy implementation has produced real tensions amongst the different ethnic groups, who bring contested ideologies and interests to the discourse about educational rights. The obstacles for achieving a common ideology of the school system between majority and minority ethnic groups are understandable - the Malays would not agree to any ideology that was not entirely Malay, while the non-Malays would resist such an ideology as amounting to assimilation of the non-Malays.

In settling the ethnicity issues in the education policy processes at enhancing equity in Malaysian schooling, the organising logic of the state approach drew on the intention of protecting the supremacy of the dominant group, as well as accommodating the demands of other ethnic groups. This can be called an accommodative policy in Malaysian education in settling the ethnic contestation and the politics of ethnicity in relation to education resources.

A consensus between the major ethnic groups prior to independence has been regarded as the foundation for building the nation, including the ethnic minority recognition of the status of the Malay language, their religion and special privilege (Wang, 1978). This refers to the social contract between ethnic groups as the basis for nation building in the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. The problem that emerged in relation to ethnicity surrounding education policy was that the consensus did not continue as the basis for policy production. Such policy through enforcement within undemocratic ways of implementation precipitated unease amongst different ethnic groups in the country. Most of the policy produced by the state was the decision of the policy makers within the state official machinery and involved less consultation with the recipients of policy. This brought multi-faceted interpretation to policy.

Although such ethnic challenges can be viewed as rooted in strong attachments to identity and culture, the policy orientation of ethnic-based policies also contributes to the construction of a consciousness of ethnic identity. In this sense, education policy becomes one of the most important contributors to the maintenance of cultural distinctions, which produce a sense of ethnicity and ethnic identity in Malaysia's pluralistic society. Competition and survival in Malay-based policy has caused the non-Malay to find ways of ensuring their interests in the economic and education fields. In education, various changes in the Malay-dominated state policies and attitudes have led to anxieties among the non-Malay about the future of their education. This brings diverse preferences regarding type of education between ethnic communities, in which there is *ceteris paribus*, the higher the degree of feeling threatened by such

policy in education, the higher the ethnic inclination to their preferred education system and schools. On the other hand, for the Malay, any policy action that they see as posing a threat to their status and special position will bring discontent to the state.

## **5. Mediating the Local and Global Interest in Enhancing Equity and Quality in Education**

Managing and mediating ethnicity issues in Malaysian education policy cannot only be seen in the context of ethnicity. This is a complex issue comprised of a pastiche of features; for instance, it also involves competition and challenges inside and outside the national context. The state emphases in the policy process, while to some degree influenced by discourses of ethnicity, on the other hand are also inspired by regional and international factors. For instance, the continued discourse amongst the Malaysian leaders about the standards of English in Malaysia declining in terms of English language proficiency, even compared to other countries in Southeast Asia (Omar, 2000) has influenced the state action to enhance the standard of English amongst Malaysians. Singapore has perhaps been a significant reference society for Malaysia here.

While the state's campaigns for national language is based on emotion (Omar, 2000), and to promote such language for national identity and dignity, the policy implementation emphasis given to English is based on pragmatic-reasons. Hence, discourse on the importance of Malay in developing the nation was surrounded by the politics of emotion, and on the other hand for English, as the politics of reason. This is a tension between the nationalistic concern and the pragmatic concern of developing the nation through language utilisation. This is also related to the struggle for protecting the ethnic privilege of the Malay with the state endeavouring to progress national development in the global field. For the non-Malay, both the pragmatic concern and the politics of ethnicity are at play, relating to the preservation of ethnic and culture identities and for their economic benefit as well. In the long run, based on the policy scenario and the state attention to economic interests, perhaps the politics of reason will ultimately be more powerful, as the state policy-orientation relates to the desire to be a developed country and competitive within the global economy.

Given the milieu of ethnic division and ethnic politics in Malaysia, the social contract amongst the major ethnic groups, the Malay dominance and the bargaining power of the minorities, has produced a problematic situation for the state, and produced polemics surrounding policy. However, arising from this situation and given the complexity of the ethnicity landscape, as well as the landscape of economic and political interests, the policy development and implementation, to some degree, have been much influenced by political and economic contingencies. For pragmatic reasons, there is a growing recognition by the state to regard the multiethnic character of the Malaysian education system as an attractive advantage and asset in an increasingly globalised world. For now, indications are that the state generally has recognised the value of preserving Chinese education in the country. An important factor is perhaps because of the pragmatic concern that the Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese, and Malaysia in general,

would be a valuable human resource in developing and strengthening the commercial links between China and Malaysia, since China will be a major economic force in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Guan, 2000). This can be seen in such policy action allowing medium of instruction other than national language in some educational institutions. In this sense, the state will be more pragmatic in determining which languages are appropriate for such educational institutions, particularly in relation to English as the medium of instruction, or other languages of instruction, influenced explicitly by economic and global interests (Gill, 2002).

The recent discourse amongst the state leaders shows that the acceptance of various streams of the school system is a unique feature for the country and an added advantage for the nation. However, beyond the state politics of policy implementation, the recent scenario of school choice amongst multi-ethnic parents in Malaysian society is of more concern to the politics of reason. These parents are seeking material or economic advantage for their children and are less concerned with the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. For example, there are now some 60,000 Malay pupils studying in Chinese-medium schools, not necessarily because their parents wanted them to learn the Chinese language, but because they believed the teaching there to be more committed (Lin-Sheng, 2003, p. 149). Thus the discourse of multiculturalism in the schooling system means the state and the society are beginning to recognise the different types of school system. This change in perception has also directly benefited Chinese education in the country and helps generate the state policy orientation for preferring multilingual education.

In addition, the creation of a more confident Malay community both in the area of politics and economics, affected directly or indirectly by the state policy of affirmative action, has lessened the sense of pre-1969 insecurity. As a result, a communal call did not evoke the same degree of political response as was the case in the past. The emergence of a new generation of Malaysians from all communities, who are willing to question ethnic-based politics, to some degree reflects the success of the government's efforts in inculcating a greater sense of being Malaysian through the educational system. Younger Malaysians in seeking to play a meaningful part in society now tend to reject ethnic approaches and are instead inspired by new and more universalistic ideals. Issues of human rights, justice, democracy and freedom have become the rallying calls (Hing, 2003, p. 357-358).

Accepting Malaysia as a multi-ethnic society with conflicting cultural values and interests, education policy and programmes need to accommodate or blunt the tensions and competing interests between different ethnic groups, while needing to deal with the policy of preserving Malay rights, and to accept a politics of reason which sees education in the English and Chinese language as important national assets for facing the global challenge. In this sense, the process of policy production in the Malaysian education system demonstrates an attempt to keep faith with accommodation, tolerance and consensus in managing ethnicity issues in the context of globalisation. The role of the state is as a conscientious keeper of the balance to develop a united and developed Malaysian nation.

## 6. Conclusion

Malaysian education policy has been influenced by many factors. The plural nature of its society, the struggle for preserving ethnic and culture identities, and independent efforts of some ethnic communities to make provision for their mother tongue and the desire to maintain dominant ethnic group status and hegemony are amongst the challenges. These, in addition, have also been complicated by the global demands and influences upon the national educational system in this developing country. Thus there are multiple forces pulling policy in different directions.

However, the desire of the state to ensure that education plays an important role of unifying and integrating the multi-ethnic population remains important in policy processes in education in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2006). Within the explanation of the historical contexts and policies in the Malaysian education system aimed at enhancing equity and quality of education, it has been demonstrated that Malaysian education policy development has played a significant role in reinforcing the national agenda of developing the nation. Such policies have been to some extent successful in eliminating ethnic differentials, but on the other hand have also contributed to the construction of ethnic differences.

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