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Malaysia's Gallant School System in Need of an Overhaul¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A much-needed debate on the strengths and weaknesses of its education system has recently been ignited in Malaysia. This article discusses some key factors involved in the evolution of the country's school system.
- In concise terms, Malaysia practises a transition bilingual model. All its primary schools teach the same syllabus and its vernacular schools instruct in Chinese or Tamil medium before transiting to a Malay-medium secondary school system.
- The establishment of exclusive schools for Malay high achievers crucially contributed to the decline of the former premier English schools. Previously, these latter schools enrolled high achievers from all ethnic groups which contributed to facilitating interaction between ethnic elites.
- Instead of being a hindrance to national integration, vernacular schools in effect promoted a multicultural Malaysian identity and can today potentially enhance opportunities for Malaysians in the global economy. In fact, with many across all ethnic groups demanding it, there is also good reason to reinstall the English stream.
- Policies and programmes that have contributed to ethnic segregation in schools; the falling quality standards of education; the parochial nationalism and the Islamisation of national schools; and the mono-ethnic staffing are in need of revision and overhaul.

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¹ The focus of this paper is mostly on peninsular Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

A recent controversial pronouncement by the Sultan of Johor state on the language of instruction in Malaysian schools immediately brought renewed attention to the present condition of the education system in the country. The Sultan had called for English to be further encouraged as the medium of instruction. The issue represents the tip of the iceberg of controversies over the education of the young which have plagued the country since its very beginnings.

For starters, it discouraged the newly independent Malaysia from adopting a monolingual education system as a means to unify its ethnically diverse populations into a one-nation, one-language community. Instead, decolonization politics resulted in the continuation of the British colonial state's multilingual school system that, after independence, evolved into Malay-medium primary and secondary national schools and vernacular Chinese and Tamil primary schools. Policy makers such as the pioneering educationist Aminuddin Baki, were already aware of the potential centrifugal effect of a multilingual education in encouraging schooling to occur along ethnic lines.

The initial plan was to turn the Malay-medium national schools into the preferred education stream for all ethnic groups. Instead, various developments and exclusivist policies and programmes after 1971 accentuated ethnic segregation in the educational system. This essay highlights some key aspects of ethnic segregation in the public educational system, especially at the primary and secondary school levels.

MULTILINGUAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND MONOLINGUAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The laissez faire approach in the provision of education during colonial times resulted in independent Malaysia weaving together a school system that was multilingual in many ways.

English medium schools, often located in urban areas, enrolled students from all ethnic groups, while the bulk of Malay, Chinese and Indian students were enrolled in their respective mother tongue schools. Figures from 1956 provide a quick understanding of the situation just before independence. That year, enrolment in the English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil primary schools were approximately 89,000 (12% of the total enrolment), 360,000 (49%), 240,000 (33%), and 46,000 (7%) students respectively.

Though preserved, this system was nevertheless subjected to gradual and major changes.² Malay primary schools were elevated to the status of national schools (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan, SJK), in line with Malay being anointed the national language, while English schools (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Inggeris), SJKI) were downgraded to vernacular schools.³ Chinese (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina), SJKC) and Tamil

² Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya 1945-1961*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press 1997

³ English was recognized as an official language for the first 10 years after independence.

(Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil), SJKT) vernacular schools were preserved as it was agreed that they played a key role in safeguarding the minorities' languages and cultures. To assist national integration, all primary schools, regardless of their medium of instruction, adopted a common syllabus that included the teaching of Malay as a compulsory subject.⁴

Another significant change to the education system was initiated in 1962; Chinese secondary schools⁵ were issued an ultimatum – convert to English medium if they want to continue receiving state funds. Of the 68 Chinese secondary schools then in existence, 14 rejected the offer and went on to become the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) while 54 accepted and were transformed into “National-type” Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSSs).⁶

The ICSSs stayed Chinese medium schools and went on to conduct their own final examination, the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC). The UEC is recognized as a qualification for admission into many universities around the world and also by private Malaysian tertiary institutions, but not by the Malaysian government for admission into local public universities.

In the 1960s, while most Malay, Chinese and Indian students continued to enrol in their respective mother tongue primary schools, it was the SKJIs' enrolment that registered the fastest growth. Thus 10 years after independence, in 1967, enrolments in the Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil primary schools were 591,560 (45% of total enrolment), 289,056 (22%), 355,771 (27%) and 79,203 (6%) respectively (Ministry of Education 1967, pp. 32-35). Similarly, there was a spike that year in the demand for English secondary schools; total enrolment in English secondary schools, now including the NTCSSs, were 286,254 while enrolment in the ICSSs fell from 34,410 in 1962 to 22,221 in 1967.

Both primary and secondary English schools became incrementally ethnically diverse as Malay, Chinese and Indian parents opted for an English education for their children.⁷ Since English was widely used in the public sector then and in business and industry, and was the medium of instruction in higher education, it was regarded as an asset that non-speakers want to acquire. Also, English schools provided a superior education and an English education would increase students' educational and socioeconomic opportunities. Choosing an English education over mother tongue education for their children meant that non-English speakers' parents were pragmatically prioritising socioeconomic and educational opportunities over linguistic and cultural loyalties in enrolment choices.⁸

⁴ Recognizing the importance of English, the Razak Report also proposed that it be taught as a subject in Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools.

⁵ There were no secondary Tamil schools.

⁶ In the NTCSS, Mandarin is offered as a compulsory subject.

⁷ Nevertheless, Malays remain underrepresented especially because the English schools were located in urban areas while a vast majority of Malays continue to reside in the rural areas.

⁸ Similar trends were also taking place in Singapore where Chinese schools experienced falling enrolment as more Chinese parents opted to enrol their children in English schools for the same pragmatic reasons. Falling enrolment in Chinese schools was in fact one of the major factors that led eventually to the demise of Chinese schools in Singapore.

The conversion of English schools to Malay-medium ones coincided with several developments which further prejudiced Chinese parents' enrolment choices. The socioeconomic and educational rationale that spurred the Chinese to school their children in SJKIs had largely petered out, and widespread preferential policies privileging Malays severely limited Chinese opportunities in the public sector and admission into public universities. As such, for the Chinese, learning the Malay language was not an asset. Over the years, the quality of education in most SJKs deteriorated and, more inopportunistically, a creeping "Malayisation" and then Islamisation of schools became entrenched. Recurrent incidences of discrimination against non-Malay students in SJKs only confirmed non-Malays' belief that their children were not treated fairly or equally. It has not been reassuring for them either that the teaching and administrative staff are overwhelmingly dominated by one ethnic group. In the end, besides offering lower standards of education, the SJKs have become mono-ethnic and parochial.

Hence a gradual decline in enrolment to English schools ensued from 1971 onwards, as they embraced the Malay medium; by 1976 all SJKIs and by 1982 all English secondary schools, including the NTCSSs, had converted. Of the total Chinese primary school students, the percentage enrolled in SJKs declined from 22% in 1971 to 10.1% in 1985 and 4% in 2011 (Table 1). Conversely, SJKCs' enrolment increased from 78% in 1971 to 89.9% in 1985 and 96% in 2011. At the same time, Indian student enrolment in the SJKTs increased from 46% in 1985 to 56% in 2011. There are now more Indian than Chinese students enrolled in the SJKs.

Table 1: Distribution of Chinese and Indian Students by Type of Primary School (%)

	1971		1985		2000		2011	
	SKJ	SJKC/T	SKJ	SJKC/T	SKJ	SJKC/T	SKJ	SJKC/T
Chinese	22	78	10	90	8	92	4	96
Indians	-	-	54	46	49	47	38	56

Source: Ministry of Education

With China's rise as an economic power in recent years, a mastery of Chinese language has been increasingly viewed as an asset. Furthermore, SJKCs are also reputed to offer higher quality standards of education and better discipline and work ethics compared to the SJKs. Indeed, the above factors have also influenced increasing number of non-Chinese, including Malay, parents to enrol their children in SJKCs⁹. From 2010 to 2014, non-Chinese enrolment in SJKCs increased by 20.7%; from 72,443 (11.8%) students in 2010 to of 87,463 (15.3%) in 2014. In 2016, non-Chinese students made up nearly 18%, numbering nearly 100,000, of the total enrolment in SJKCs such that they are now more ethnically diverse than the SJKs, which are largely mono-ethnic.

There is however more ethnic diversity at the secondary school level, since the majority of Chinese and Indian students are enrolled in the national secondary schools (NSSs). Nevertheless, some of the factors contributing to ethnic segregation in primary schools have

⁹ Tan, Yin Yin Julia, 'Malay Parents' Perspective on Admission of Their Children to Chinese Primary School in Kelantan, Malaysia', *Journal of Arts, Science & Commerce*, Vol. 6 (1), January 2015, pp. 26-30.

also affected the pattern of enrolment at the secondary school level. The ICSSs, which experienced falling enrolment in the 1960s and 1970s, underwent a U-turn improvement; for example, enrolment increased from 44,656 in 1983 to 55,143 in 1997 and 79,264 in 2014 (the figures include Sabah and Sarawak).

For Chinese parents, the NTCSSs have become the preferred choice for their children. Thus enrolment in these has increased from about 25,000 in the 1990s to 128,459 in 2005. In contrast, Chinese enrolment in the former premier English secondary schools¹⁰ has fallen over the years. These schools no longer attract a majority of the Chinese students who had excelled in their Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) nor do they have a highly competitive environment. Even for Malay students who excelled in the UPSR, there are now more attractive alternatives for them (see below). The falling standards of those schools are shown in the fact that almost none of them are in the high performance schools category.¹¹ Conversely, many NTCSSs are today more reputable than the former premier English schools.

EXCLUSIVE PROGRAMMES AND SCHOOLS

Exclusive programmes and schools catering to the needs of the dominant ethnic and religious group have also contributed to ethnic segregation of schools in Malaysia. Since 1970, many such programmes and schools were established to expand Malay educational opportunities. In the 1980s, the Islamic resurgence led to a growing demand among Muslims for Islamic education including studying in a more Islamic environment. Initially, private Islamic schools were established by non-government organizations and the government only later started to implement the Islamization of education and establishment of Islamic schools.

Government residential schools are elite schools that admit only Malay students¹² who have excelled in the examinations. These schools receive the highest per capita state funding and have the best qualified teaching staff and facilities and amenities. Almost all residential schools' students receive some sorts of government financial aid. Hence competition for a place in the residential schools is very intense, and, as expected, the schools are disproportionately represented in the list of High Performance Schools.

The Council of Trust for the Bumiputra (MARA) established elite boarding schools called MARA Junior Science Colleges (MJSCs) to enrol Malay students, especially from poor rural background, who have excelled in the examinations. The first MJSC was launched in Seremban in 1973. Importantly, the MJSC adopted an internationalisation system that offers a dual certificate programme consisting of four examinations; PT3 and SPM (in Malay), and Cambridge Checkpoint and IGCSE (in English). That means selected MJSCs are exempted from being Malay medium so that they could offer IGCSE and Cambridge

¹⁰ Such as Penang Free School, St Michael's Institution, Victoria Institution, St. John's Institution, Malacca High School and so on.

¹¹ Under the Ministry of Education list of High Performance Schools, a majority of them are fully residential schools and MARA Junior Science Colleges.

¹² In recent years, the government introduced the policy to allocate up to 10% of total enrolment in the residential schools to non-bumiputera students as a means to raise the academic competition.

Checkpoint exams which are English medium. Moreover, four MJSCs, Seremban, Banting, Kulim and Kuala Nerang, were converted to pre-university college status called MARA College; the English medium International Baccalaureate (IB) is offered in Mara College Seremban and Banting. From 1989 to 2015 the number of MJSCs and their student enrolment increased by more than twofold from 31 to 69, and from 18752 to 41428 respectively (Table 2).

The state also turned to developing the existing residential schools into the Fully Residential Schools (SBY) to increase the intake of Malay students. The first residential school, Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), had been established in 1905 by the British to provide an English public school education for scions of the Malay aristocracy in preparation for a career in the colonial administrative state. A residential college for Malay female students was built in 1947, originally located in Kuala Lumpur and later relocated to Seremban and renamed Tunku Kurshiah College (TKC). Between the Razak Report on Education in 1955 and the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), the government established seven more residential schools; Kolej Islam Sultan Alam Shah (1955); Sekolah Dato' Abdul Razak (1956), Sekolah Tun Fatimah (1956), Sekolah Tuanku Abdul Rahman (1957), Sekolah Menengah Sultan Abdul Halim (1963), Sekolah Sultan Alam Shah (1963), and Sekolah Seri Puteri (1968). Since 1971, the government has greatly expanded the SBY system by establishing residential schools called Science Secondary Schools (Table 2). In 2015, there were 69 SBPs with a total enrolment of 41,428 students. In recent years, the two SBY premier schools MCKK and TKC have started to offer the IB programme.

Table 2: Enrolment in Fully Residential Schools and MARA Science Junior Colleges

	1989		2000		2015	
	Number of schools	Enrolment	Number of schools	Enrolment	Number of schools	Enrolment
SBP	31	18752	39	25000	69	41428
MRSM	14	8182	25	15424	52	34395

Source: Ministry of Education

As part of its strategy to expedite and increase Malay enrolment in universities, the government enrolled Malay students in pre-university programmes administered by the universities. These programmes were developed into the matriculation programme in local universities in the 1980s. Starting in 2005, the selection process for the programme is done through a race-based quota system, where 90% of the places are reserved for bumiputeras students while the remaining 10% are open for non-bumiputeras. After 2006, two-year programmes were added to the existing one-year programme in the matriculation system. In 2015, matriculation programmes are offered by 15 colleges (excluding two offered by two local universities), namely 10 Matriculation Colleges, 2 MARA colleges and 3 Technical Matriculation Colleges with a total enrolment of 21,002 students.

Islamic education experienced a declining trend after independence as more and more Malay parents opted to enrol their children in the national school over the religious school.¹³ The shrinking enrolment resulted in Islamic schools and madrasah closing down. However, the Islamic revivalism in the late 1970s gave Islamic education a new lease of life as increasing numbers of Malay parents wanted to either enrol their children in Islamic education or in schools with Islamic practices and environment. The growing demand for Islamic education soon led the government to be pro-active in the provision and regulation of Islamic schools.

Islamic education in Malaysia today are provided by four types of religious schools. These are set apart in terms of the portion of religious instruction in their curriculum, management, and funding sources. National schools and national religious secondary schools are directly under the jurisdiction of the Education Ministry, while state religious schools are managed by their respective state Islamic agency and the people's religious schools are established by the local community and receive federal and state agencies assistance as well as private donations.

In 2015, for primary religious education there were 36 Government aided Religious Schools enrolling 15,780 students, 51 Religious Primary schools enrolling 20,760 students, 11 State Religious Primary School enrolling 6,592 students and 56 People Religious Primary Schools enrolling 19,793 students. For religious secondary education, in 2015 there were 181 Government aided Religious Schools enrolling 69,158 students, 57 Secondary Religious schools enrolling 39,950 students, 31 Religious Secondary Schools enrolling 9,950 students, 71 State Secondary Religious schools enrolling 39,434 and 88 People's secondary religious schools enrolling 25,479 students.

CONCLUSION

The multilingual primary schools and monolingual secondary schools setup in Malaysia is an uneasy but reasonable model for a multi-ethnic society, and is appropriately called a transitional bilingual model.¹⁴ The provision of six years of instruction in Chinese would adequately meet the language rights and safeguard the cultures of the Chinese community. Importantly, many studies on children learning have shown that education in the mother-tongue medium is the most effective method.

Instead of viewing Chinese schools as a hindrance to national integration, the state should treat it as a resource in light of the growing presence of China in an increasingly globalized economy. As there is growing bumiputera demand for Chinese education for socioeconomic and educational reasons, state policies should facilitate this trend by allocating extra resources to and establishing new Chinese schools, especially in the urban areas. Conversely, the SJKCs and NTCSSs should develop an environment that is less alienating to non-Chinese students.

¹³ Rosnani Hasim *Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice (2nd Edition)*, Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press 2004.

¹⁴ Tan Yao Sua & R. Santhiram, *The Majority-Minority Nexus: Education of Ethnic Minorities in Plural Societies*, Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD 2015

After many decades of education in the English medium, there is now arguably a significant percentage of Malaysian families who can claim English as their mother tongue or their first language. Moreover, many non-English speakers across all ethnic groups do want their children to acquire mastery in English because they see it as an invaluable asset. English medium schools would probably attract students from all ethnicities which would be a positive development in terms of fostering inter-ethnic interaction.

Finally, the government should evaluate and amend the factors that have contributed to transforming SKJs, to an increasing extent NSSs, into mono-ethnic enclaves.

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