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Malaysian educational policy for national integration: Contested terrain of multiple aspirations in a multicultural nation

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This article discusses multiple perceptions and views about policy in Malaysian education policy which aims for achieving national integration in a multicultural setting. The discussion in this article is based on the policy research about Malaysian education policy and ethnicity issues that continue to be an important aspect in Malaysian education policy process aimed at achieving integration through the education means. Using a quasi-historical and a qualitative research approach, eleven Malaysian participants across different ethnic and professional backgrounds who have been involved directly and indirectly in the production of Malaysian education policy were interviewed using semi-structured interview method. Based on the interview data gained from the interview with these individuals, this research shows that Malaysian plural society remains in a contested landscape in ideology and aspiration of building a united and harmonious Malaysian nation.

Key words: Educational policy, ethnicity, ethnic arithmetic, national integration.

INTRODUCTION

Given that Malaysia is an ethnically pluralist society, one of the major ongoing tasks of the Malaysian government has been to develop a nation which is harmonious, integrated, and democratic and which shares a national identity and values as a Malaysian nation. This aim has been a concern of the government from independence until the present, and is reflected in the need to develop a united Malaysian nation. The latest effort of the government in this direction is its Malaysia policy. This important aspect of national integration is a central part of state policy as the country faces a complex social pattern with a population which is multi-ethnic in nature and divided, in which the different ethnic groups carry their own cultures, languages, identities and values. In many ways, this situation can be viewed as an inheritance from British colonialism. The government concern about

national integration has also resulted in education being regarded as an important policy domain to pursue national integration. Accordingly, amongst the aims of national education policy, national integration is a major intention. It has been accepted that education is expected to play a significant role in nurturing national consciousness, moulding national identity and forging national unity amongst the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. This is in line with the common reality of education contributing in all societies to the creation of the 'imagined community' which is the nation (Anderson, 1991). However, in spite of that, not all these efforts were simply implemented; rather there was contestation and ethnic bargaining.

Ethnic considerations remain central in the production and implementation of education policy in Malaysia. How the government attempts to satisfy the demands and needs of respective ethnic groups is a delicate business that touches on ethnic sensitivities and interests. Therefore, the education policy processes aimed at

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national unity always need to consider ethnicity issues and face many challenges based on ethnic interests. However, for the government faced with plural and diverse cultural communities, holding these disparate ethnic and religious groups under one national umbrella seems a major challenge. The authors refer to this reality as the 'ethnic arithmetic' in Malaysian education policy development. In spite of the government's efforts, there are many arguments that suggest the objective of a united nation that has not yet been achieved. Wan (1983) stated that there is a low level of integration between the Malays and the Chinese based on cultural and social understanding. Sufean (1993) has questioned whether the integration spirit is enough to show the effectiveness of the educational policy because there are continuing issues of ethnicity in public and private discourses. The studies of Toh (1984), Mukherjee and Singh (1985) and Lim (1985) reflect a common concern about the impact of educational policies after 1970.

Some researchers have stated that Malaysia's numerous ethnic communities remain distinct, in part due to the continuation of communal political parties and in part due to the fact that constitutional and policy practice emphasise a Malay-non-Malay dichotomy on all economic, social and political dimensions (De Micheaux, 1997; Lin-Sheng, 2003; Cheah, 2003a, b; Haque, 2003).

Aims of the study

The study examines the perceptions, arguments and opinions amongst the actors who are involved directly and indirectly in the complex and multi-layered processes of educational policy production and implementation. The researchers have worked across the three major ethnic groups to analyse the issues behind the challenges of ethnicity in Malaysian education policies. The paper examines the responses and discourses of the various ethnic communities concerning the ethnic challenges, national and global issues surrounding educational policy production aimed at achieving national integration through the Malaysian education system. How does the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia regard the education policy initiatives for achieving national integration as currently constituted in Malaysia?

METHODOLOGY

Critical social theory describes social reality not as an equilibrium system but as a system characterised by dominance, exploitation, struggle, opposition and power (Johnstone, 2002). Critical policy analysis or critical policy sociology research on a moral idea and is concerned with social justice (Prunty, 1985; Taylor et al., 1997; Ball, 1994a). It goes beneath the surface appearances and is interpreted in substantive issues and wants to show what is really going at the societal level. Research grounded in this perspective attempts to show what is wrong with the status quo. It is not only concerned with what is happening, but also concerned with doing something

about it, that is the process of deconstructing and reconstructing (Harvey, 1990). This study has adopted an interpretivist and critical perspective stance in its approach. This is within the critical policy sociology (Ozga, 1987) which acknowledges that among other things, opportunity and justice in education are inequitably distributed. The critical aspects in this kind of analysis seeks to 'take things apart' (Kogan, 1975: 5) and to 'evaluate the distributional impact of existing policies and the rationales underlying them' (Walker, 1981: 225). Within the Malaysian context, it seeks to understand and clarify what really happened and how it happened in relation to the complex ethnic challenges in Malaysian education policy production. It uses as quasi-historical strategy to look at the development of educational policy in Malaysia since 1970. It relies upon a combination of historical investigation, interviews and documentary evidence. This is done principally from relevant documents and literature in relation to issues of ethnicity and educational policy development. Then, an in-depth interpretive and critical qualitative approach is adopted to investigate, to explore the meanings and explanation of particular discourses, ideas, thoughts and concepts surrounding ethnic issues.

An interview method is used to obtain information from relevant policy actors involving a number of categories of people directly or indirectly involved in relevant policy formulation and implementation and captures the different viewpoints towards the particular aspects of educational policy. These interviewees in a sense formed the government, political and academic elites of the country and the interviews were conducted based on the methodology of 'elite' interviewing within the context of educational policy research (Phillips, 1998). The eleven persons identified for the interviews, though not directly part of the policy creating, decision-making team, had the ability and opportunity to access educational policy discourses about the origins, creation and implementation of the educational policy. They were four academicians, four educational administrators and three individuals from relevant interest/ethnic groups (6 Malays, 3 Chinese and 2 Indians). The educational administrators were retired former Directors and Deputy Directors at the Ministry of Education and two persons in the Malaysian Cabinet. Among the academicians were two professors who had been involved in doing research on ethnicity and educational issues in Malaysia. The NGO representatives had been actively involved regarding issues in Chinese and Indian education. All of them have enormous experience, knowledge and information about the development and implementation of Malaysian educational policies.

The interview questions focused specifically on Malaysian educational policy issues relating to ethnicity, national integration, the fit of vernacular school system in the aims of national integration and languages issues in education.

Developing the Malaysian outlook of education system and national identity: A colonial present in a post-colonial political aspiration

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Malay Peninsula was homogeneous as far as the demographic distribution was concerned. It was a largely singular society of Malays, the indigenous people. They formed about 90% of the population in 1880 (Gullick, 1969). By the time of her independence in 1957 she had become a distinctly ethnically mixed society consisting of 49.8% Malays, 37.2% Chinese, 11.7% Indians and 1.3% others (Chai, 1977: 81). The emergence of a plural society motivated by British colonial policy (Arasaratnam, 1979; Loh, 1975; Stevenson, 1975) has resulted in the Malaysian population today comprising these three major ethnic groups. They speak different languages, follow different cultures and tradition, and commonly profess different religions. The situation was further aggravated when ethnic cleavages are deepened by political, economic and educational

institutions. Colonial policy as well as communal sentiment led to the establishment of vernacular medium schools for the Malays, Chinese and Indians and English medium schools for those who wanted to take advantage of the employment opportunities that the colonial economy promoted for the English educated. In these circumstances, 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 tensions arising from contestation among major ethnic groups for sharing economic, political power and cultural space.

The overall intent today of Malaysian educational policy is to achieve national unity in a multi-ethnic society. In other words, efforts towards national unity and social cohesion remain a major agenda of national education policy. The objective of national unity ranks very high as a national agenda and is particularly acknowledged as the top agenda item for achieving the aim to be a developed country in 2020 (Mohamad, 1991: 28). In this sense, national cohesion has been a meta-policy goal of Malaysian education policy since independence. This policy goal has expressed and been influenced by a politics of ethnicity. Indeed, the policy implementation signalled that many contemporary policy issues concerning ethnicity, national integration and schooling have their beginnings in colonial times and can in some ways be seen to be part of the colonial inheritance of Malaysia and part of what Gregory (2004) has called the 'colonial present'. In state and public discourse, the consensus between the major ethnic groups has commonly been understood as a 'social contract' between them. This contains provisions which protect the legitimate interests of each community in the country and is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. It has clearly distinguished the special rights of the Malays and other ethnic groups' rights as citizens in Malaysian pluralist society. In this sense, the concept of social contract is about the special position for the Malays for granting of citizenship. This has been considered as an underpinning element for a guiding principle of Malaysian independence and further development of the country. In this sense, ethnic compromises between the major ethnic groups were an important aspect that made the population determined to gain independence from the British.

In the education context, this compromise and bargaining also constructed the policy process and set the scene of political bargaining and striking fair deals for the ethnic members in relation to language and school in Malaysian education system. Such accommodative politics have been the norm in Malaysian education policy in accommodating difference ethnic groups' interests to education. The settlement of policy in education in Malaysian education system for post independence was the result of an agreement and trade-offs reached due to independence among the major ethnic communities (Malays, Chinese and Indians). This consensus agreement amongst political elites from the three major ethnic groups can be looked as a binding agreement between all major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Taking its inspiration from the Razak Report of 1956, the Education Act 1956 set the overall framework of the educational policy which accommodated vernacular medium schools for the Chinese and the Indians; and English and Malay mediums schools, whilst "having regard to the intention of making Malay the national language of the country..." (Federation of Malaya, 1956: 1). A crucial requirement of the educational policy was to re-orientate all schools to a Malayan outlook. This was an essential element in the development of a united Malayan nation. The orientation was to take place through a common content in the syllabuses of all schools irrespective of medium of instruction.

The situation was to be reassessed by the Rahman-Talib Review Committee in 1961 that resulted in the Education Act of 1961 (Federation of Malaya, 1961). It introduced changes in the secondary level which furthered the principle of a unified Malay

language, government-aided education system. The Act stated the view that after a ten-year period after independence, which was regarded as a period of transition, Malay language should assume a dominant role. As such, after 1967 Malay should be the main language of instruction in the secondary level. But the 1967 National Language Act, while reaffirming Malay as the sole national and official language of the country had a lot of compromises built into the Act which left the exact role of Malay Language still in doubt. The ambivalence of the 1967 National Language Act left the long standing inter-communal *modus vivendi* very much intact. The ultra-nationalist Malays remained unsatisfied because of the importance given to English, whereas the non-Malay opposition parties spoke of the betrayal of four million non-Malays in the country (Roff, 1967: 326). The period after 1969 ethnic riots, specifically beginning from 1970 is marked as the starting point for the changing policy orientation of the state in developing a united Malaysian nation. Since then, national unity has become more important and led the government to implement policies with special intention of national unity and integration (Malaysia, 1971a, 1986, 1990). This intention of utilising education for unifying the multiethnic society has been reflected in policy production for the early stages of the socialisation process which occurs at the school level. In view of the inter-ethnic economic disparity as a major problem precipitating ethnic tensions, the state believed that ethnic tensions can be resolved by accommodating dissatisfaction amongst particular groups. It believed that integration could not be achieved if one or more groups felt economically disadvantaged in relation to other groups (Malaysia, 1971a: 1). The condition for developing a united and harmonious Malaysian nation was to narrow the gap of economic and social status between the Malays and other ethnic communities, especially the Chinese. In addition, the state believed that language issues and particular ethnic groups' dissatisfaction with the liberal approach in implementing the spirit of the education policy since independence was amongst the important causes of the ethnic riots (Malaysia, 1971b; Cheah, 2002). This gave birth to the affirmative action policy for the Malay indigenous majority (the *bumiputra*). This policy also simultaneously focused on language and culture of the dominant majority.

Collectively, it became known as the 'new economic policy' of the government to unite the nation post-1970. It also identified education as the major vehicle to promote unity among all Malaysians by providing an opportunity for social and economic mobility within society, particularly in improving the standing and opportunities of the Malays. The policy statements put in place firm policy production and implementation in the area of the National Language as the main medium of instruction, beginning with the unilateral declaration of the Minister of Education in 1970 to implement the Malay language as the main medium of instruction in all schools and institutions of higher learning in stages to be completed by 1983 (Datar, 1983). Other than the language of instruction, the policy of assisting and positioning the Malay dominance in higher education was further entrenched by the quota system derived from the affirmative policy for the Malays which allotted 60% of public university places for Malay students.

However, while vernacular Chinese and Tamil primary schools remained intact, accommodating the right to mother tongue usage in education, Malay language became the only medium of instruction at the secondary schools. Chinese and Indian students from the vernacular primary schools transferred to Malay secondary schools went through an immersion year in Malay language in the secondary school. Chinese medium secondary schools continued to exist as independent schools without government funding and non-recognition of their certificates of examinations. As a prescription for ethnic tensions between the ethnic majority and the minority, this policy was challenged by the minority groups as they saw such changes as imposing ethnic majority aspirations and posing a threat to their culture and language rights and created

unease especially among the Chinese educationists (Tan and Santhiram, 2010). Contestation towards the state ideology in education relating to language and school system has always been present in the Malaysian system. Communal political parties have voiced different discourses in terms of integrating the nation and have overtly opposed the Malay language policy (DAP, 1968; Means, 1986). Policies changes such as the Minister's power to abolish Chinese vernacular school boards (Yek, 2002), the implementation of the New Primary School Curriculum in 1982 were challenged by the Chinese as the government's attempt to abolish vernacular schools and switch the language of instruction of the Chinese and Tamil schools to Malay (Yong, 1982).

The case of the Merdeka University proposal with Chinese as a medium of instruction was refused permission by the state. The integrated School Programme of 1985 of using the school for integrating the multi-ethnic society met with stiff opposition from the Chinese educationists. The aim was to bring together all children from different ethnic groups by locating the three types of primary schools close together to allow for common activities and collaboration in extra curricular activities. The Malays supported this idea assuming that it would eliminate polarisation but the Chinese educationists feared that this was the death knell for vernacular medium primary schools. Other issues like the posting of non-Mandarin educated Headmasters and Senior Assistants to Chinese primary schools in 1987 too, met with strong opposition by the Chinese community. The 1990s too saw a clash of views on the changes brought about by the state. The impact of globalisation, the need for sciences and technologies advancement necessitated a fresh look at the Malaysian education system. In 1996 a raft of Education Bills were tabled in Parliament to give more powers to the Minister to determine what language should be used as a medium of instruction in the private institutions of higher learning. It also gave the Ministry of Education powers of supervision and accreditation of the private institutions of higher learning. The 1996 Education Act did not go through the usual processes of consultation with the public and component parties of the coalition. And this raised the anxieties of the Chinese that it would erode the position of the vernacular languages further. Again, the then Prime Minister suggested a return to using more English in schools and introduced the policy of English for teaching 'mathematics' and 'science' to boost the standard of English of Malaysians. This was interpreted by both the Malays and non-Malays as affecting their interests in education. The Malays felt that it did not accommodate their special language status and contribute to their educational attainment whilst the non-Malays saw it as posing a danger to mother tongue education.

Another major effort by the state for promoting integration of the various races at the school level was the idea of the 'vision schools' aimed at developing effective ethnic relations amongst school children. "This concept means that two or three different types of schools and administrations are placed in the same building or area" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1995: 9). Ethnic dissension relating to the 'vision schools' focused around disagreement between the national interest in implementing the state agenda of national integration and the ethnic group's interest of protecting their mother tongue education. The Chinese community saw this as a step towards converting all mother-tongue primary schools to the national medium. The Chinese saw no explicit statement in the 'vision school' documents of the Ministry of Education that would protect the status of the medium of instruction for the Chinese and Tamil schools. While the state favoured towards Malay aspirations and a Malaysian education system, the Chinese posited the discourse of multiculturalism for uniting the nation towards equal and non discriminatory cultural development. The continuing struggle of the Chinese educators to have their rights regarding mother tongue recognised in education is amongst the major issues needing to be tackled by the state in Malaysia. To the Chinese, the

education system should encourage diversity to fulfil the aspirations and needs of the multi-ethnic society. But for the state, linguistic diversity is conceived as incompatible with national unity, as the state priority is for an education system which Malay language for achieving national integration. While in the same vein, the policies are tweaked to accommodate the use of English for teaching 'mathematics' and 'science' for pragmatic instrumental purposes as a means of international communication. As can be seen by the aforementioned historical account, the contradictions and tension between the state ideology and the ethnic minority standpoint on national integration are rooted in the tension between dominant hegemony and the multi-cultural nature of Malaysian society. This conflict of ideas about national integration is a contested terrain between the ethnic minority seeking to preserve their cultural and language identities with the dominant aspiration of the ethnic majority to enhance their cultural and social status in the process of nation building.

The ethnic challenges towards the education policy for national integration between the different ethnic groups are marked by competitive discourses of language, culture and identity, and are also influenced by the discourse of Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra (Malay and non-Malay) in Malaysian social, political, economic and employment spheres. When seen against the interview data, it provides an insight into the competing perspectives and discourses on Malaysian education policy as achieving national integration among the different ethnic groups. It shows us how the multiethnic society of Malaysia regards the education policy initiatives for achieving national integration.

THE INTERVIEW RESULTS

Education for national integration – Conflicting discourses and contested ideologies

Conflicting discourses

"The first thing we must remember is that national system has succeeded in integrating the curriculum content. The curriculum is uniform even though the language of instruction is different. So that is one of the first aims in the immediate post independence period in the 1950s. This was the aim because before independence, the schools were not only teaching in different languages, they were teaching different things and they were still looking outward and not looking inward. Integration at the level of making all children studying the Malaysian context, in the same kind of curriculum has been accomplished. We have generally put what could be regarded as a national system and system is indeed similar throughout the country. But if you think of integration as bringing children together from different culture, different languages, that has not been achieved (Interviewee 01, A/Chinese)".

This image of inter-ethnic relations amongst students in the Malaysian school-site demonstrates that state policy is yet to achieve its aim in terms of promoting ethnic interaction amongst different ethnic groups in schools. It shows that the policy outcome has failed in bringing together children from different ethnic groups and

developing significant ethnic relationship for constructing inter-ethnic cohesion. Amongst the factors that contributed to segregating the children is the language issue which refers to the mother tongue issue of the ethnic minorities. It indicates that language is a major aspect for producing conflict discourses between the state and ethnic minorities within the policy context for integration. The interviewee commented that this is a difficult issue that is an obstacle to the policy aim of achieving national integration through the schooling process:

While we are talking about different aspects that have been accomplished without much problem for producing national education system, the main issue preventing greater integration of children from different ethnic groups is the issue of mother tongue education and different medium of instruction. I think we could say that the government since independence has been very sensitive to the political implication in this issue (Interviewee 01, Chinese).

The tensions between ethnic communities and the state regarding education policy for national integration continue to exist. Controversial issues emerged from the conflicting discourses regarding issue about ethnicity, language and culture in the policy context. The interviewee suggested that the tensions would always be there:

"I think that in terms of ethnicity and language and cultural issue, we have gone through a difficult phase. However, i suppose we never reached a point of critical difference, and controversial issues always keep coming up (Interviewee 01, Chinese)".

"I think national integration in this country is very brittle. You know, it is only ok at the superficial level but beneath it, it is very brittle. You know anything might explode and it will be nothing (Interviewee 07, Malay)".

"Even in the university, there is no integration in terms of ethnic relations. The Indians are with their own ethnic group, the Chinese are in their group and the Malays in another group. There is no integration. They go along ethnic lines. This has happened even in the national school. You go to the national schools the Malays, Chinese and the Indians do not mix with each other. There is no integration there. They are in their own ethnic groups (Interviewee 02, Indian)".

A similar argument was raised by another interviewee regarding the idea of integration in the state policy. For this interviewee, the state's concept for national integration is unsuccessful to 'promote real understanding' amongst the different ethnic groups in Malaysian plural society. The interviewee commented on

this point:

"Malaysia has for the most part been a peaceful country that has not experienced serious racial conflicts. We can attribute at least some credit to the educational system for this success. However, the education system is still flawed in that it does not promote real understanding between different ethnic groups in the society, beyond mere acceptance and tolerance. This is in part due to the fact that the educational policies have not effectively encouraged meaningful interaction among students from the different communities (Interviewee 11, Malay)".

In this sense, the 'real understanding' in the context of national integration is related to the concept of integration 'beyond mere acceptance and tolerance' amongst different ethnic groups in Malaysia. This can be linked to the discourse of national cohesion and connected to issues of democratic and fair policy orientation in satisfying the rights for all Malaysians for education and culture, as well for economic and political rights. This also indicates that national cohesion cannot be simply interpreted as peaceful ethnic relations in terms of political stability alone in Malaysian pluralist society. The interviewee has argued that superficial integration and harmonious ethnic relations were achieved through fear and other drastic measures in the policy process. In this sense, the interviewee refers to the state action in 'controlling' sensitive issues of ethnicity and preventing them being discussed openly and publicly in Malaysia. For this interviewee, laws that prohibit open public discussion on issues related to ethnicity, including language, religion and culture limited the interaction between ethnic groups. Hence, there is too little intermingling in terms of open discussion on ethnicity issues and this, for the interviewee 'has had the inadvertent effect of limiting greater institutionalised integration' (Malay Interviewee, 11). The interviewee suggested that any attempts at developing 'meaningful interaction' should be based on freedom and open discussion on ethnicity issues for building real understanding among the races in a multiethnic society. This would enhance a discourse of democratic policy processes in abetting and enhancing national integration in the Malaysian plural society context. Furthermore, the interviewee suggested that the Malaysian education policy process did not accomplish the aim of national integration as the policy framework has not adapted to the changing scenario of Malaysian plural society.

The interviewee suggested that recent education policy developments for national integration were not changed to accommodate the changing era and society. For this interviewee, the state made less effort to modify the policy spirit and philosophy to fulfil the present demands. The following interviewee commented on this point:

"To a large extent the aim of the Razak report in 1956

and the Rahman Talib Education report in 1961 have been to promote national unity. The weakness or failure of these initiatives is that they have not adapted to the demands of the subsequent and present day periods. There has been little evolution of the philosophy of educational policy since then (Interviewee 11, Malay)".

The aforementioned discussions outlined the comments of the interviewees regarding the circumstances of Malaysian education policy and efforts at achieving national integration through education. These opinions have placed the differing views of the various ethnic groups regarding the conception and ideology of national integration in Malaysian education context. This indicates that there are different interpretations about the concept of national integration for Malaysian plural society.

Contested ideologies

Malaysian education policy was established in a clear framework to unite the multiethnic younger generation through the education system. This policy framework was commenced by the Razak Report of 1956. One Malay interviewee commented that this should have guided the subsequent policy enactment for integration in Malaysian schools. The interviewee explained that this Report embodied the main ideology of Malaysian education policy to develop common identity, values and the national sense through the national education system. Amongst other means of building the nation was the use of national language in the mass education system to develop a kind of imagined Malaysian nation which is united and sharing common identities and values. The interviewee commented:

"If we observe the early developments when our country obtained independence in 1957, we find that one of the early attempts in educational planning based on unity in the process of nation building was officially commenced with the establishment of the Razak Education Committee. The Razak Report outlined a clear vision, namely: an educational system focused upon and orientated towards nationhood and language. In this context, the Malay language became the instrument or catalyst for unity and this is explicitly stated in the report. Although this is envisaged as a gradual process, in essence the building of nationhood had clearly commenced via the educational process. This became the cornerstone of National Education Policy and subsequent reviews and revisions by the Rahman Talib Education Review Committee (1960) which also generated a report. Both these reports became the bedrock or foundation of the Education Act 1961 (Interviewee 06, Malay)".

Referring to this policy ideological framework, the

interviewee claimed that some consequences indicated that the policy succeeded in achieving its aim in diffusing the national ideology of shared values and national identity across different ethnic groups in Malaysia. The interviewee argued that for a period, the policy practice in relation to national language in education has been successful in producing the nation that pervades the nationalistic criteria. The interviewee commented thus on this point:

"The EPRD (Educational Planning and Research Division) reveals that 5.4 million graduates of the national education system comprising the various ethnics have been produced since 1970 till 2001. The majority of this group will form the bedrock of national development in fields such as education, administration, law, engineering, medicine and others. Although at tertiary level, they would have certainly pursued their studies abroad and be required to use a language other than Malay, but the basic education obtained in the schools for about 11 years would certainly had been in the Malay language. Thus, this encapsulates the meaning of nation building in terms of unity, and the question of how we define race and statehood. We have succeeded in producing a workforce imbued with nationalist characteristics and it is certain that those imbued with this nationalist consciousness will become the bedrock/cornerstone of national development (Interviewee 06, Malay)".

In addition, the interviewee claimed that the policy has produced considerable results in developing a society which is relatively homogeneous and which has been successful in eradicating a sense of ethnic prejudice. The interviewee accepted that this has reduced ethnic boundaries and enhanced ethnic interaction through the common language of communication in education. Thus, the interviewee believed that 'the slogan proclaiming a new language a new culture, new language new thinking was actually being realised' through the implementation of national language policy in education processes. The interviewee commented:

"The implementation... had till 1970, depicted that the ideals envisioned and planned by Tun Razak and his colleagues had yielded obvious results from several angles. One of which being racial unity. This could probably be an interesting study if it could be carried out in schools. This is based on my impressionistic views during my visits to schools over the last 15 years, my involvement in teachers' unity training programmes during the implementation of which i was able to witness how interaction took place amongst children from various ethnic backgrounds. I was truly moved and thankful to those children from the various ethnic groups did not display any characteristics of ethnic discrimination, or ethnic prejudice and their discussions or arguments

appeared to be relatively uniform. I believe that the slogan proclaiming a new language a new culture, new language new thinking was actually being realized. It was as if children from the Chinese and Indian communities did not appear flustered by language differences as well as differences in world-views, value systems and outlooks. This i think has been one of the successes of the national education system (Interviewee 06, Malay)”.

The interviewee also argued that the emergence of nationalistic sentiment is a ‘sign of determination’ whether the integrated nation of a pluralistic society has been achieved. Indeed, the interviewee suggested that this basis of nationalist criterion needed to be diffused through the mass education system. The interviewee regarded that the regional culture which refers to the dominant ethnic culture should be the fundamental basis for building the nation. Here, the regional culture refers to Malay culture and language. This construction is assimilationist and the fabrication of the nation is based on historical and dominant ethnic aspirations:

“In building a nation state, or even a national cultural policy, the most important underlying uncertainty is the regional culture. This has been a historical fact for centuries and as well as its oral and written traditions. That is only natural that something fundamental and native be highlighted. I consider this to be a rational stance (Interviewee 06, Malay)”.

The aforementioned perspectives on the education policy concept of integration represent the dominant group’s ideology (read as Malay nationalist) in culture and national language. However, the non-Malays bring contradictory views on the concept of integration in the education policy context. They claim that the ideology in state education policy for integrating the nation has produced dissatisfaction amongst other ethnic communities relating to their culture and language identity. This has produced conflicting discourses on the idea of integration between the Malay and non-Malay; in relation to assimilation and multiculturalism in constructing integration. The tension is between those keen to assimilate the ethnic minorities to the dominant group’s culture through language in education. This point was illustrated in the following comment:

“We have different opinions about the concept of national integration. When i review the policy, especially the educational policy of the government, they say, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, normally the government and the Ministry of Education emphasised that they were trying to achieve national integration through a mono language system. At that time, the policy highlighted the national language. I still remember the slogan ‘one nation, one language’ or something like that. Under this concept the government at all times emphasised

educational policy on this basis. That’s why, there are so many conflicts on this disagreement (Interviewee 05, Chinese)”.

For the Indian interviewee, the concept of integration is more than language, which is about respect for and understanding of the other cultures and beliefs, and not imposing one group’s beliefs on others. This is also true of the other ethnic groups. This also signals rejection of assimilation. The interviewee argued that the important dimension for integration is recognition of cultural diversity and harmonious relationships in culture and respect for different ethnic sentiments. This is about understanding of multiculturalism in Malaysian society. The interviewee stated that:

“We should also take into consideration that integration is just not through the language. We can bring about greater integration by understanding other people feeling or other people sentiments. You should not sort of condemn other culture or values and over emphasises your own faith or belief (Interviewee 09, Indian)”.

The Malay interviewee also echoed the same sentiment about cultural understanding in Malaysian pluralistic society. Furthermore, this interviewee regarded that social, political and economic tolerance is also an important aspects for building ethnic integration. This is an important aspect for integration in relation to fair distribution of social and economic resources and political rights across different ethnic groups. The interviewee commented:

“Yes, i am looking to more than that, not just you integrate and talk together. Integration is more than that. We have to understand the different cultures in our society. To me integration is also about the willingness to give and take, because three ethnic groups are not in the even playing field. So one is at the advantage of the other and if there is a real natural integration, than there is an indication of willingness to give and take. But i do not think that is about real, voluntarily and willingness (Interviewee 03, A/EA/Malay)”.

One Chinese interviewee commented that the basis for integration depends on how the ethnic minority interests in relation to language would be accommodated in education. The interviewee explained that the state ideology of national integration in relation to language in education has produced apprehensions amongst the Chinese regarding their rights to their language. While accepting the status of Malay as a national language, the interviewee asked for the preservation of vernacular schools in the national education system as currently practised:

“We agree that Malay is the National Language. There is

no argument, no objection. But meanwhile, we should support the development of the other languages. We should support other stream of school because in Malaysia you have the national schools and national type of schools for the Chinese and Tamil language. This mean multi type of schools do not base on one type of school. The government can consider one type of school, but if we follow this way, can national integration be achieved? This will develop other feeling from other ethnic groups, even from open minded Malay. The national integration should be achieved through the fair policy not just formally you of together, you just learn one language will achieve the unity (Interviewee 05, Chinese; Interviewee 01, A/Chinese)."

In this competing discourse of negotiating the basic aspect for national integration through education in Malaysian multiethnic society, the interviewee admitted that the state's effort at national integration in schooling was rather unfair and ethnically biased in terms of culture and language. For this interviewee, such policy was not a representative of the aspirations of all ethnic groups in relation to language rights in education. For this interviewee, the concept of fair policy meant government policy implementation on Chinese schools should be the same as that practised in the national schools. The interviewee commented:

"I still remember when the government introduced the New Economic Policy, the Chinese Chambers of Commerce and the Chinese Assembly Hall and also the Chinese educationists felt that this policy has quite a lot of things that have been overlooked. How can you say it is fair if they are not applied in the Chinese schools? (Interviewee 05, Chinese)".

Other Chinese interviewees seemed less optimistic about the monolingual approach in relation to achieving national integration. For example:

"The government tries to find national integration in its own way and for many years in the 1980s and 1990s it was defined as monolingual policies. This policy has not contributed towards integrating multi-cultural society in the country (Interviewee 04, Chinese)".

The concepts of 'fairness' and 'equal' in the education policy are linked to social and economic aspects. This for one Chinese interviewee is the basis for achieving integration. The interviewee expressed this:

"The government still overlooks the fact that the unity must be based on the fair policy. Just because three people get together, it does not mean unity will be achieved. You see, Taiwan and mainland China also have a lot of disagreement. In Malaysia, PAS and UMNO, the members profess the same religion, same language,

all the same but the disagreement is very big. So they also quarrel and fight with each other. Why? This is because of the policy, because of the concept. So, you come back to the school. If you want to achieve the national unity, the basis is fair policy in social, economic or even others is very important (Interviewee 05, NGOs/Chinese)".

Discourses about 'fairness' and 'equal' in relation to policy are also linked to the minorities' concern regarding the policy for strengthening the Malay position in social and economic spheres through affirmative action. This also contributed to the divergent discourses regarding national integration of Malaysian multi-ethnic society. One interviewee noted:

"When you talk about integration and you do not really practise it fully, then how we are going to achieve integration? Even though you talk about patriotism, this is the same thing. In order to achieve this aim we have to treat everybody as equal. Of course we have to understand the government policy, you know, it is one thing to help the Malay, but it is a sort of thing that must come to an end. You see they put thirty years for the economic policy and there is a fear that they are going to re-implement. Some people feel, and the politicians feel that this policy is not been achieved. So they have to come back to it. So there are a lot of arguments (Interviewee 09, Indian)".

In some situations, the controversial ethnic issues produced by the policy have affected the relationship and understanding between different ethnic groups. Here is an example of the ethnic boundary constructed by this policy:

"Before independence, or even in the 1960s, the communication was very close. I got a lot of Malay friends. We simply sit together and all the time we have close contact. But later, because of the controversy of some policy issues, then there become boundary for us to be together (Interviewee 05, Chinese)".

In relation to the concept of 'fairness' in education, the discourse amongst the Chinese and Indians is linked to their claim regarding mother-tongue, culture and identity issues. However, the Malay brings different interpretations of 'fairness' into this policy. For example, the Malay interviewees linked this concept to their special rights and their cultural and language status. This is related to the Malay rights as the 'sons of the soil' of the country. In my interview with the Malay participant, this notion of 'fairness' in policy was interwoven with the notion of Malay rights in relation to their position as the dominant group within the policy context. This interviewee has said that the policy is fair in relation to the way it has protected the rights of the dominant Malay

group. The interviewee expressed that the Malays also feel the situation as unfair when they experience their rights being marginalised by the policy. One Malay interviewee commented:

“The problem is that the minority do not respect the history and the reality when they are talking about fairness. They talk about fairness for their children, about scholarships and things like that. Discrimination towards an ethnic group is even worse than discrimination towards an individual. People seldom talk about it. People see the Malays, the majority, as strong but what are they strong at? The ones controlling the economy are the minority and not the majority. Because they control the economy, they control the politics as well. Now many of the Malay children also did not have the opportunities that are theirs rightfully (Interviewee 10, Malay)”.

In this sense, discourse about fair policy is linked to different interests of different ethnic groups. They feel that their interests are either marginalised or ignored by policy implementation in education. The policy-in-practice produced different interpretations in relation to the majority and minority ethnic interests which are entrenched in different social and economic positions in Malaysian society. On one side, the minority groups – the Chinese and Indians who have significant political bargaining in the policy processes, make strong demands for their rights and interests, on the other hand the Malays who feel that the policy practice has deprived them of their special rights and status as the dominant ethnic community in the country, are standing up for their rights. This point indicates that the Malaysian education policy faces multifaceted demands in respect of ethnic groups’ interests in relation to language, culture and identity, as well as economic interests. Hence, the competing interpretations regarding the policy concept were inspired by differing and competing ethnic perspectives and related to social and economic contestation:

“The whole political scene was very different. Polarisation was in the air, and after May 1969, the government policy also shifted. Too much compromise was thought to be a problem. It moved to Malay dominance in culture, in business. “The quota system began... even if you get good results you are not assured of getting a place in the university. You might not be able to get a government job. That is the beginning of the big division. As a result, Chinese parents tend to take their children out (of national schools). But new children enrolling in the Chinese schools increased (Interviewee 01, Chinese)”.

These contradictory ideas about national integration and how the policy should accommodate the different discourses of different ethnic groups in education complicated the role of the state in promoting national

integration in schools. In this case, the Malay interviewee suggested that the essential relevant strategy is to diffuse national ideology across such differences in schools to enhance understanding amongst the younger generation. While accepting the multi-ethnic nature in Malaysian schools which is historically, socially and politically constructed, the interviewee commented:

“It is rather unfortunate when the national education system which has been carefully planned ultimately cannot be implemented in totality due to appearance of chauvinistically laced issues. Thus we are forced to accept the reality that there exists a national type stream at primary level for Tamil and Chinese schools and at secondary level in private Chinese secondary schools. This to a certain extent is of little assistance to nation building as we ultimately produce different streams. Nevertheless, i feel that there is a need to have certain measures to diffuse the national ideology and concept in national type primary schools so that they will not have a different sub-system; although it would be difficult to shut down these schools physically. I feel in terms of implementation the ministry and the government itself should have the relevant plans (Interviewee 06, Malay)”.

The interviewee’s idiom, ‘we are forced to accept the reality’; it demonstrates the element of disinclination in accepting the different types of schools at the primary level as currently constituted in the Malaysian education system. Yet, national integration must accept such a reality, and must be premised on a certain ideology that can develop understanding and tolerance, acceptance and recognition of different ethnic positions based on history and the reality of Malaysian plural society. For this interviewee:

“If this understanding is infused via the national type primary schools into the non-Malay community, i am confident that the nation building process will attain greater success’ (Interviewee, 06)”.

This point emerged when i asked what the interviewee meant by the national ideology in integrating the different ethnic groups in Malaysian plural society. The interviewee explained the national ideology for uniting the nation in the following way:

“National ideology does not imply an ideology that destroys selfhood. National ideology is an ideology that helps in the attainment of unity, understanding and comprehension of national characteristics. This should be linked with the agreed social contract. The acceptance and the acquiescence of the Malay community in receiving the other communities as citizens is well documented. This is balanced by the acceptance of four main issues by the other communities. Among them was language in that the Malay language is the national and

official language, the position of the Malay sultans, Islam and the special rights of the Malays and other Bumiputeras. In my opinion, these constitute the basic premises for nation building. Thus, the agreed social contract should not be destroyed. It is an important agreement as it constitutes the turning point on which the nation's foundations were laid upon (Interviewee 06, Malay)".

Hence, the 'national ideology' needed to infuse children's thinking is related to the 'social contract' between the major ethnic groups. In this sense, the younger generation could be able to understand that the minority groups (in this case referring to the immigrant groups during the British colonial era, who have occupied a significant social, economy and political position since independence – the Chinese and Indians) have already accepted the position of the Malays in the country in return for their minority rights as citizens of the country. This is regarded as a key element for the nation building process. This has shaped the concept of Malay and non-Malay reciprocal relationships in the process of nation building, and for the Malay, this is regarded as a fundamental aspect for national integration and ethnic harmony. From this point of view, the minority groups' recognition of Malay social and political supremacy, as well the preservation of ethnic minorities' rights as citizens in the country are important aspects of nation building:

"The interviewee believed that such ideology needs to be diffused in the education process of the younger generation in schools to 'constantly reinvigorate or resurrect the younger generations' and recognise 'the understanding and observance of the social contract we cobbled together at the dawn of independence' (Interviewee, 06)".

The aforementioned perspective on national integration signifies such concerns of maintaining Malay dominance over policy matters in the Malaysian education sphere, including the policy and programmes for national integration in schools. What is covered in the texts is the ideology of Malay supremacy related to the 'social contract' which has influenced Malay thinking. The interviewee hoped that the state mechanism for formulating and implementing policy in education should 'indoctrinate' such an ideology in the Malaysian younger generation.

The ideology is predicated on the belief that the Malays are the dominant ethnic group who are the 'masters' of the country, and that the Chinese- and Indian-Malaysians who form a significant minority in Malaysia should be grateful to the Malays for granting them citizenship. This discourse of Malay status forms the bedrock of the policy process for national integration and is also intimately related to discourse of Malay – non-Malay or

'bumiputera - non-bumiputera' dichotomy. While these aspects have influenced the policy process in Malaysian education, they have also created feelings of ethnicity in Malaysian social life and how the communities regard the policy orientation in relation to ethnic differences. On the issue of teaching of Mathematics and Science in English, the views of both the majority and minority ethnic groups converge. But they converge for different reasons. The discourse of the importance of English is seen as a challenge to the Malay hegemonic ideology in relation to national language in building the Malaysian nation:

"This policy was perceived as a betrayal of the vernacular languages and the national education policy. It is now rejected by Malays and Chinese. I would say that there is no real challenge with this policy. It is simply a bad policy (Interviewee 11, Malay)".

"The government introduced this policy based on their own interpretation of how you need English to survive in globalisation. I think this is a very short sighted policy. We do not hear about the Russians, the French, the Germans, the Japanese or the Chinese changing their system of education to English because of globalisation. Why should Malaysia suddenly change to English? (Interviewee 04, Chinese)".

The importance of English in the dissemination of knowledge must be tackled within the paradigm of improving the teaching (of English) itself and not through other subjects particularly those which cannot enhance the mastery of English. For example in Mathematics, how much is the language element used in the question of formulae and their operations? Science is also a technical field which does not use much language when compared to other subjects. This is about the wrong choice of strategy in using English for teaching Science and Mathematics and not a question of opposing efforts to improve the mastery of (English) language (Interviewee 06, Malay)".

Conclusion

There are always opposing discourses about the policy for integrating the multi-ethnic Malaysian society. While the state policy is to look at national integration only through its national language policy and the harmonious social interaction between the multiethnic groups, to the exclusion of other issues which they consider to have been settled through the 'social contract' agreed upon at the time of independence, there are competing aspirations among the different ethnic communities in relation to national integration. Malays and non-Malays have different aspirations and perceptions about rights in education, language for integration and socio-economic opportunities in and through the Malaysian education

system. For one thing, the Chinese and Indians feel that equal opportunity could improve integration. For the Chinese, a fair policy is a basic principle for achieving integration, albeit through multilingualism. There is also a hint that fairness in socio-economic and employment policies would promote this elusive concept of national integration. The assumption that the main ingredient for national integration is the educational policy is an oversimplistic one. Whatever sense of national identity fostered by the educational policies is undermined by government policies that officially discriminate by race. Racial harmony can be held together by a genuine respect for each other and good feelings between the varied ethnic and religious groups. This cannot be just through education initiatives alone. The question of economic opportunities, equitable distribution of economic wealth, non-discriminative policies in education and employment opportunities have to be factored into this ethnic arithmetic that lead to a full and fair partnership irrespective of ethnicity. Hence, discourses about integration are also connected to the social, economic and political contexts of contemporary Malaysian life.

The demand for integration is entwined with demand for a democratic and fair policy for different ethnic groups. While the state has to remain steadfast on a policy for Malay privileges for the core aspects of the education system, it should also ensure that other ethnic groups are given social and economic opportunities in relation to socio-economic position and it should outlaw inequality of opportunities imposed on any individuals or groups. This could assist in producing a just and fair policy in the education field in the Malaysian context. The need to give more emphasis to socio-economic inequalities across and within ethnic groups, including both majority and minority groups, is a clear and significant finding of this research. Such a focus would offer indirect opportunities for integration. This quote by an interviewee sums up the aspirations of all Malaysians:

“Affirmative action is not only in Malaysia, it is everywhere, but to me, deep in my heart, the government should assist the bright but poor Malay students, Chinese students and Indian students. There should not be a quota. If you are bright but poor and cannot afford it, we must help whether you are a Malay, a Chinese or an Indian. But if you are rich, even if you are a rich Malay you should not be helped. I do not mind our government helping.... (Interviewee 07, Malay)”.

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