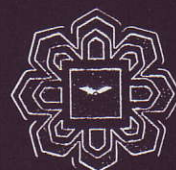




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## BALANCING CULTURAL PLURALITY AND NATIONAL UNITY THROUGH EDUCATION: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA

Rosnani Hashim\*

### Abstract

*This paper analyzes the attempt made by the Malaysian educational authority to maintain a balance between the need for national unity and the need to preserve cultural diversity among its multi-cultural population. Striking the right balance in a civic society is a virtue and this problem is not only true for Malaysia but for any multi-cultural society as the world gets more globalized. Primary education in Malaysia is conducted in three types of national schools, each using the pupils' mother tongue – Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – as the medium of instruction. This is to accommodate and preserve the diverse cultures. However, in view of the nation's aspiration toward national unity, secondary and tertiary education are conducted using Malay as the medium of instruction. The paper analyzes how basic issues of a common language, affirmative action for the under privileged race, and a common school have united or divided the nation. It also examines the extent to which these educational efforts have met the goal of balancing national unity and cultural diversity. Finally, the paper looks at the problems and challenges faced by the Malaysian educational authority and suggests ways to improve the situation.*

### Keywords

Multicultural Education, Malaysia, Race Relations, Cultural Diversity, Language, Affirmative Action.

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\*Dr. Rosnani Hashim is a Professor at the Institute of Education, IIUM.

### Introduction

A "plural society" according to Furnivall (1944:xxii) is composed of "two or more elements or social classes who live side by side as parts of a single political unit without merging into each other." It is this distinct and separate character of society which marks it as a plural society. The process of nation building in a pluralistic or multi-cultural society involves bringing together citizens of culturally and socially diverse groups, of different racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations toward a common destiny. As we live in a more globalized world, a pluralistic or a multi-cultural society cannot be avoided. But a multi-cultural society poses its own problems. The diversity of culture, ethnicity race and language, especially when any of these variables are used to provide special privileges to some groups and deny others equal opportunities to participate will create tension, instability, upheaval, racial polarization and conflict.

Two basic approaches toward nation building have been noticeable in multi-cultural nations, namely cultural assimilation or cultural pluralism. In cultural assimilation or the "melting pot" approach people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds interact freely in the life of the larger community from which will emerge a new identity. However, it often turns out to be a one-way process in which members of an ethnic group, especially migrants, have to give up their original culture and are forced to acquire the core culture, which predominates the society. However, according to Bennett (1995:86) in cultural pluralism or the "salad bowl" approach, "members of the different groups are permitted to retain many of their cultural ways, as long as they conform to those practices deemed necessary for the survival of the society as a whole." Cultural pluralists argue that the minority ethnic cultures generally contribute to and enrich the host society. Thus, the different groups would retain their languages, customs, religions and artistic expressions.

This paper will examine the tensions that exist between on the one hand, the desire to recognize cultural plurality of the various groups comprising the nation, and on the other, the needs to forge national unity in the case of Malaysia. Malaysia is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and

multi-faith nation and in the year 2000, had a population of about 23 million, which comprised 66.1% Bumiputeras (Malay and other indigenous groups such as the Kadazan and Iban), 25.3% Chinese, 7.4% Indians and 1.2% people of other origins (Statistics Department, Malaysia 2000). The Malays make up the dominant indigenous group while the Chinese and Indians came into the country during the colonial period in the early nineteenth century to work as labourers in Malaysia's tin mines and rubber estates. Due to its multi-racial composition, Western scholars such as Emerson (1946) and Bock (1970), have found Malaysia to be an ideal place for studies on race relations, national identity, as well as integration and pluralism. According to Bock (1970), Malaysia is also useful in examining the role of education in the process of nation-building because although the problems of national identity, national integration and redistribution are present to some degree in nearly all the transitional states, they seem more intense in the case of Malaysia, due to the size and power of Malaysia's ethnic minorities and to the serious political and economic imbalances which exist between them.

This paper will examine the tensions arising from the recognition of the distinct cultural identities of the various ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians and the need to forge national loyalty, the spirit of patriotism and cohesion. The complexity of these tensions lies in the paradox that recognition of the different cultural identities often detracts efforts to foster national loyalty and cohesion. The focus of this paper will be to demonstrate how education has been intentionally employed to bring about the necessary balance. It is necessary to point out that in contrast to most multi-cultural societies where the majority racial group is also economically dominant, in Malaysia the reverse is true. This paper will examine Malaysian educational policies and their development, and the challenges and prospects for national loyalty and cohesion and cultural pluralism.

### The Seeds of Educational Pluralism in Malaysia

The existing educational institutions and policies in Malaysia have been very much shaped by its modern history. Probably due to the British

colonial policy of "divide and rule," the three ethnic groups have been duly separated through four different vernacular primary school systems, namely the Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools. Only a handful of Malaysians had the opportunity to attend English schools that were built in the urban centres. The British colonial government did little to unite the various races in Malaya. It was only after the Second World War that two committees, the Barnes Committee and the Fenn-Wu Committee were set up to study the condition of Malay and Chinese education respectively. They reached different conclusions with respect to social integration. Barnes as Chairman of the Federation of Malaya Report of the committee on Malay education (1951) supported an assimilationist view while Fenn-Wu (1951) supported a pluralist view with respect to the use of English and Malay as the medium of instruction instead of Mandarin and Tamil for the respective school systems. As a compromise, the government passed the Education Ordinance of 1952, which retained the four vernacular schools as part of the national school system and gradually introduced English into Malay vernacular schools, while Malay and English were introduced in Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools. Hence, it can be seen that it was the British administrators who had planted the seeds for educational pluralism within the country during the colonial period.

#### **Forging National Unity Through Educational Policies**

At the onset of independence, realizing the importance of forging unity among the populace, the British colonial administrators commissioned a committee chaired by Tun Abdul Razak (1956), to look into:

...the present educational policy of the Federation of Malaya and to recommend any alterations or adaptations that are necessary with a view to establishing a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the

country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the languages and culture of other communities living in the country (Para 1a).

Consequently, to orient pupils to a common Malayan outlook, to inculcate national consciousness and to foster mutual understanding among the various ethnic groups, the Razak Report (1956) recommended a common national language, a common syllabus content and the compulsory study of the national (Malay) and English languages in all primary and secondary schools. The report also recommended the conversion of all existing primary schools into national (Malay medium) and national-type (English, Chinese and Tamil medium) schools. In the spirit of tolerance and in order to accommodate the two other major ethnic groups the Chinese and the Indians, the national-type primary schools were allowed to operate in their original language of instruction. The English language was introduced in all the primary schools, in the belief that higher education could be made available to all ethnic groups.

The necessity of preserving cultural pluralism and the importance of the role of a common language for fostering national unity was further affirmed in 1960 when the Rahman Talib Report of that year proposed:

...to conduct education at primary level in the language of the family and thereafter to reduce the language and racial differential in our education system. For the sake of national unity, the objective must be to eliminate communal secondary schools from the national system of assisted schools and to ensure pupils of all races shall attend both National and National-type secondary schools.

Consequently, the vernacular Chinese secondary schools had to decide whether to conform with government policy and receive government financial support or to remain as independent schools. Fifty four Chinese secondary schools opted to be conforming schools while fourteen remained as independent schools (Tan, 1997). Examinations in secondary schools

were to be conducted only in the two official languages of the country, namely English and Malay.

The Rahman Talib Report also proposed that "primary education in the National Language be developed by the introduction of the National Language stream in former Government English primary schools subject to the availability of suitable teachers and all assisted primary schools to be converted into national or national-type primary schools by provision of appropriately trained teachers" (Para 131-8). However, this attempt to introduce the National Language stream in English schools was dropped after two years due to poor response from parents. It was only in 1968 that the process of conversion of English primary schools began in stages (Ministry of Education, 1971).

With the exception of the national type English schools, the other national and national type schools then had ethnically homogeneous groups of pupils. It was only in the national type English primary and secondary schools that one could find inter-racial interaction. The other national schools, namely the national and the national type Chinese and Tamil schools, could not offer this experience. In a sense, as argued by Loh (1975) the national education system itself had planted the seeds of separatism and fragmentation. Apparently, the Rahman Talib Report (1960) recognized and accepted the plurality of the primary schools, which in a way delayed the process of racial interaction in the secondary schools. The Razak and Rahman Talib Reports subsequently formed the cornerstone of the national education policy in Malaya and these were incorporated into the Education Act of 1961. Thus, the notion of national unity through a common school and a common national language as the medium of instruction in schools was only possible at the secondary level. Maintaining cultural pluralism during the crucial formative years of the primary school had the benefit of preserving cultural identities but the disadvantage of hindering racial interaction, exchange and understanding. Since schools are a reflection of society, what happens in schools is also true of what happens in society. In Malaysia, there seems to be little racial interaction since professions were also ethnically oriented, with

most Malays joining the civil service or carrying on with traditional occupations such as farming and fishing, the Chinese in commerce or in professional and the occupations majority of the Indians working in the plantation sector.

### **Lack of Educational Opportunity, Poverty and Affirmative Action in Education**

The strongest impetus for the government to generate national unity in a more serious manner was provided by the May 13, 1969 racial riots. The government had to reflect very hard upon its policies and to determine the root causes of the riots. It was realized that something was definitely wrong with the system. Upon analysis it was discovered that the economic imbalance among the various racial groups, especially the poverty of the Malays was the major grievance and cause of the riots. Deeper analysis revealed that the economic imbalance resulted from an educational system that did not allow for equal opportunity in higher education, especially for the Malays due to the use of English language as the medium of instruction in all institutions of higher learning. The disadvantaged position of the Malays with respect to education was an offshoot of the colonial educational policy on Malay vernacular schools, in which no English was taught and there was a reluctance to build English schools in rural areas where Malay population is. The Malays were not happy with that system. Apparently, as argued by Roff (1967), education for the Malay masses was terminal and designed to produce only "better farmers and fishermen." It was never intended to serve as an avenue for upward social and economic mobility. According to Ho Seng Ong (1952, p. 88), a Malayan educationist before Independence, "an educational, economic and social distance between the Malay and the other communities was thus created, to the disadvantage of the Malay."

The first Malay national secondary school in the country was set up only in 1958. Before the end of 1969, there were four higher education institutions all having English as their medium of instruction – the University of Malaya (1949), the College of Agriculture (1947), the

Technical College (1949) and the MARA Institute of Technology (1967). Sociologically, it has been argued that education could be an important means for social mobility. However, opportunities for higher education was not provided for those attending national secondary schools having Malay as the medium of instruction. In the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 incident, the government fully employed the education system towards rectifying social and economic imbalances so as to provide greater equity across racial lines and thereby, to promote national unity.

The government introduced the New Economic Policy in 1970. It had a two-pronged goal: the eradication of poverty and social restructuring by eliminating the identification of economic functions with race. The New Economic Policy laid down its target of 30 percent Bumiputera equity shares in the economic sectors by 1990 and introduced the quota system of 55 percent Bumiputeras to 45 percent non-Bumiputeras for university admission. The government justified these steps as affirmative action for the poorest sector of the society who happened to be the Bumiputeras who had been discriminated against during the colonial period.

To provide graduates from the Malay national schools with the opportunity for higher education, the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia), with the national language as its medium of instruction, was established in 1970. It was also found that the Malays and other Bumiputeras lagged behind in the field of science and technology (see Table 1). To redress this issue and in line with the idea of the integrationists of the positive effects of attending integrated schools along social class lines, science-stream residential schools and special matriculation programs were set up to assist poor, rural Malay students. Finally, scholarships for higher education in the field of science and technology were provided for academically qualified Bumiputeras.

Table 1

## Distribution of Professionals in Malaysia, 1970 (percentage)

	Bumiputera	Non-Bumiputera	Others
Accountancy	6.8	73.3	19.9
Architecture	4.3	82.3	13.4
Engineering	7.3	84.5	8.3
Medicine	3.7	85.0	11.3

Source: Malaysia, *Fourth Malaysia Plan 1981-1985* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers, 1981), 60.

## Conversion of the Medium of Instruction from English to Malay

The government seriously pursued the educational policy of gradual conversion of all national-type English schools into national Malay medium schools but retained Chinese and Tamil national-type primary schools, following a lackadaisical attitude at the initial stage in 1968. As a result, many non-Malay pupils from these schools migrated to their National-type primary schools rather than remaining in the newly converted National primary (Malay medium) schools as shown by the statistics in Table 2 for the years 1968 and 1972. Although 70.3 percent of the pupils were enrolled in National schools in 1986 (Table 2), it is not a heartening figure because the majority of Chinese pupils remained in the National Type Chinese medium schools. This is reflected by the percentage (26.1), which is equivalent to the proportion of the ethnic Chinese in the country. Recent statistics in 2001 released as the Ministry of Education, 2001 show that only 75.7 percent of the primary cohort attended the National Primary schools while 21.3 percent attended the national type Chinese schools and 3.0 percent the national type Tamil primary schools. The dissolution of the National-Type English Primary schools left a vacuum with respect to a school type that could bring together the various races to study under one roof. However, the situation improves at the secondary school level where according to Ahmad (1988), 87 percent of Chinese students continued their secondary education at national secondary schools

while the remainder continued their education at “conforming (Chinese) schools,” the enrolment of Chinese students exceeded 90 percent.

**Table 2**  
**Enrolment in Assisted National Primary Schools by Medium in Selected Years**

Medium	1968	(%)	1972	(%)	1986	(%)	2001 (%)
Malay	606,664	44.5	807,419	54.1	1,568,649	70.3	75.7
English	307,984	22.6	171,337	11.5			
Chinese	367,565	26.9	435,266	29.2	582,104	26.1	21.3
Tamil	81,428	6.0	78,758	5.2	81,051	3.6	3.0
Total	1,363,641		1,492,780		2,231,804		

Source: Ministry of Education, *Educational Statistics in Malaysia* 1968, 1972, 1986, and 2001 (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka).

### Integrated and Vision Schools

The government was aware that the prevalence of almost ‘segregated’ primary schools by race was inconsistent with its policy for the development of national unity. Therefore, in 1985, the Minister of Education proposed the establishment of Integrated Schools (*Sekolah Integrasi*), in which students from a cluster of national and national type primary schools would cooperate and collaborate in common co-curricular programs. The aims of the Integrated primary schools was to increase teachers’ and students’ participation in co-curricular activities; to increase interaction, understanding, tolerance, cooperation among students from these schools; and to maximize the use of facilities and equipments from the three schools in the cluster. The introduction of Integrated Schools was not meant to abolish the use of Mandarin and Tamil, or the eradication of their songs and cultures. However, despite explanations by the government, parents and school boards of the national type Chinese schools opposed this proposal on the grounds that it was a subtle attempt to undermine the use of Mandarin. A heated debate (W. Dagang, 1985;

Ting, 1985; Basri, Ahmad and Aziz, 1987), ensued in the national papers and the proposal was finally withdrawn.

In 1997 the Ministry of Education made another attempt at national integration through the concept of the Vision School (*Sekolah Wawasan*), whereby the three types of national primary schools in a particular area would be built in close proximity to one another. These schools would share common facilities such as school fields for sports and physical education, school canteens and also co-curricular activities. However, again there were a lot of misperceptions, misunderstanding and opposition from the Chinese schools’ authorities, associations, and parents despite assurance by the government and leaders of the Malayan Chinese Association, the dominant Chinese political organization. Consequently, the Ministry reverted to its earlier position and stated that it would go ahead only if the respective school boards voluntarily allowed their schools to become part of the Vision School. The first such school opened in Subang Jaya, a prime urban area, in early 2002.

In actual fact there is really not much of a difference between the concept of the Integrated School and the Vision School. The underlying assumption in both concepts is that through more frequent inter-racial interactions beginning in the early years, an atmosphere of racial understanding, tolerance and a civic society will emerge. Nevertheless, the weakness of both concepts has been pointed out by Hashim (2001), an educationists for their superficiality. She argued that a more meaningful and democratic interaction could only occur in the classroom. She also argued for the establishment of a single national primary school system.

### The Education Act (1996) and Its Impact on National Unity

In 1996, the Parliament approved a major amendment to the Education Act of 1961 and this became known as the Education Act of 1996. The new act paved the way for the corporatization of existing public universities and the establishment of private universities such as the Multimedia University and Petronas Technological University, as well as the branch campuses of foreign universities such as Monash University

of Australia and Nottingham University of England, with the consent of the Minister of Education. The idea was to create more places for tertiary education in the country, to save foreign exchange through education and to reduce the government's financial responsibility. The act also gave the Minister of Education the authority to close down national type Chinese and Tamil schools when appropriate. However, as a result of opposition from the Chinese community, the clause that gives the Minister this authority was amended.

This 1996 Education Act had a major impact on the country's higher education sector. It resulted in the mushrooming of 500 private colleges within 4 years and a couple of branch campuses of foreign universities. Since private education is costly and could only be afforded by the wealthy class, private colleges drew students mainly from the Chinese community to the extent that the Bumiputeras made up only 10 percent of their entire student population. The ratio of 9:1 of non-Bumiputera to Bumiputera students in private institutions was worse than the ratio of 45:55 in public universities. Thus, the problem of racial polarization among students in higher education became more distinct and aggravated.

The trend of ethnicity-based universities has seemed to gain ground in the country as well. This is evident with the setting up of the Tunku Abdul Rahman University in 2001, which is seen as the pinnacle of the struggle of the Chinese for their own university. The Chinese first mooted the idea of a Chinese language university, the Merdeka University, in the early 1970s as a channel to protest against the ethnic quotas for admission to institutions of higher learning, which had reduced access to tertiary education for academically qualified non-Malays. The Federal Court ruled against it in July 1982. With the passing of the Private Higher Education Act of 1996, the support of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a coalition partner of the ruling party, and its more national-oriented curriculum which met the approval of the Ministry of Education, the Tunku Abdul Rahman University became possible. Now the other two major coalition partners, the United Malays National Organization

(UMNO) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) representing the Malays and Indians respectively, have begun to demand a university for their ethnic constituencies. In addition to the Tunku Abdul Rahman University, the Chinese community also successfully established the New Era College having Mandarin as its medium of instruction. This latest development could be viewed in two ways. It is positive for cultural pluralism and negative for national unity because it would only be catering to the Mandarin-speaking population, which means further racial segregation.

#### **Education as a Cause of National Disunity**

The events that we have traced in our earlier discussion have shown us the various efforts of the Malaysian government, specifically the Ministry of Education, in attempting to achieve national unity through the education system. It also reveals the tension that exists between the two major ethnic groups, the Bumiputeras and the Chinese on the one hand, and the government on the other. We have seen that the Ministry of Education has succeeded in two areas, namely, having a common curriculum and having a common, national language of instruction from post-secondary education onwards. The government had also attempted to provide equal access and opportunity to quality education for the Bumiputeras especially after the event of May 13, 1969 through its affirmative action. The government also attempted curriculum innovations. It introduced civic education in the 1960s, which was later replaced by moral education in the 1980s and also curriculum reforms in the 1980s for secondary schools with an emphasis on moral values across the curriculum. However, its attempt at introducing the Integrated and Vision Schools did not meet with much success. Its encouragement of private colleges and universities too has augmented racial polarization. It has never attempted to develop a common school at the primary level.

Therefore, the role of education as an agency that could enhance the national integration has begun to be questioned by the suspicions it generated because of its policies on affirmative action and integrating



children of all races in the primary school system. Although the government leaders have explained their policies to the citizens, many still see these policies as racially discriminatory. In the 1980s, the Chinese (Ling *et al.*, 1988) explicitly expressed their grievances as more science-stream residential schools were set up and scholarships awarded to assist the Bumiputeras in producing more professionals in the scientific and technological fields. Kua Kia Soong (1990), a former opposition politician, a leader of the Chinese education movement and a social activist criticized this policy because he felt that it did not really help the poor Malays. In addition, there were fewer places for the non-Bumiputeras in higher education due to the quota system. However, it is evident that this has not adversely affected the non-Bumiputeras since many of them could still afford to study abroad through their own means. This situation has however improved a little with the Education Act of 1996, and the establishment of private colleges.

Some critics such as Singh and Mukherjee (1990), have criticized the New Economic Policy for being discriminative and insensitive to the non-Bumiputeras' needs. However, it has been shown that economically, the non-Bumiputeras were not greatly affected; on the contrary their economic share in the country rose during this period. They had made gains from taking away wealth from foreign ownership (see Table 3). Singh and Mukherjee (1990, p.16) also argued that the strategies instituted by the government to implement the policy of actively using education for national unity had a spin-off different from the one that was anticipated. "It seems ironical," they contended, "that the very measures that were introduced to create unity may be the subject of greater disunity." Actually this apprehensive view has been expressed earlier by Bock (1970, p. 42) who asserted that, "the sponsorship (or re-distribution) function of the schools appears to be seriously interfering with their socialization task of creating an integrated and nationally allegiant young citizenry." Takei, Bock and Saunders (1973, p. 37) felt that the government's attempt "to provide a more equitable redistribution of social and economic benefits

by manipulation of the educational system has continued to exacerbate ethnic sensitivities...."

**Table 3**  
**Ownership of Shared Capital of Limited Companies in West Malaysia**

	1970	1990 (target)	1990 (actual)
Bumiputera	4.3	30	19.2
Non-Bumiputera	34.0	40	46.8
Foreign	61.7	30	25.4

Source: Malaysia, *Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-1985)*, (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers), 62 and Malaysia, *Mid-Term Review of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995)*, (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers), 67.

Education has also not been successful in bringing about a paradigm shift among Malaysians of all races to think of themselves as Malaysians first. Rather, they tend to think of their ethnicity first. Some Malaysian educators and parents have defended the primary school system for educational reasons, in particular, the ease in acquiring knowledge in a child's first language. However, there are other educators and politicians who defend the pluralistic primary school system for the purpose of cultivating separate cultural identities, to bolster self-esteem based on group membership or to teach a sense of racial superiority. This is evident in the myth that pupils from the national type Chinese primary schools excel in Mathematics compared to pupils from the other two types of National schools. From a democratic perspective, the major problem with such segregated institutions is their attempt to cultivate among these children a sense of superiority based on race. These schools try to perpetuate racial discrimination.

The Princeton philosopher, Amy Guttmann (1995) argues against such a practice and asserts that "democratic governments cannot prevent

private individuals and associations from conveying to children a sense of superiority based on race, religion, gender, or class, but they must not support schools that convey the very disrespect that democratic education should be designed to dispel." So it can safely be said that our pluralistic primary school system, which segregates the various races, has failed to meet the challenge of cultivating common public values and fostering racial unity while respecting cultural differences. This fact is reinforced by the findings of the Independent Committee on Segregation in Schools established by the Ministry of Education (Abdullah, A and Chok S.L., 2002), which states that, "primary national schools which are supposed to be the foundation for the fostering of racial unity have not achieved their target because of the lack of participation from the non-Malays." (p. 1)

Thus education, which has always been seen as having the most potential in the attainment of national unity, has begun to be seen as the precursor of national disunity. On the one hand the non-Bumiputeras see the affirmative action policies as discriminative, while on the other hand the Bumiputeras see the cultural pluralism policy for primary education and the liberal private higher education policy as divisive. More recently in 2002, the Malaysian government announced its decision to apply the criterion of college admission by academic merit and also to allocate 10 percent from the total places in the science-stream residential schools and matriculation programmes to non-Bumiputeras. These could be interpreted as part of the government's effort to loosen up its affirmative action policies, and to awaken the Bumiputeras to the need to be fair to the non-Bumiputeras.

### Prospects and Challenges

The New Economic Policy and the affirmative action taken in 1970 had proven to be appropriate corrective measures and had begun to pay off with the increase in the number of Bumiputera professionals and the growth of the Malay middle class, although it is still an under-representation of the population ratio (see Table 4). However, studies (Bock, 1970;

Singh and Mukherjee, 1990; Takei, Bock and Saunders, 1973) have shown that in the long run these educational reform efforts tended to be functionally disintegrative and to interfere with the students' socialization process. These actions have made non-Bumiputeras feel discriminated against especially when abuses of the system have been observed. Although the statistics in Table 3 and the number of non-Bumiputera students studying for higher education at home and abroad do not indicate that as a group, they have been economically deprived, the government should now focus on the issue of social justice regardless of race. Educational assistance and sponsorship should now be given to the deserving with respect to poverty and potential rather than just race. It would be an injustice if a child of a middle class family was given educational assistance while another equally deserving child from a lower social class was denied any form of assistance just because of his or her race. This practice goes against the religious values of the Muslim Bumiputeras themselves, that urge them to help the needy, regardless of their faith. This is evident from the requirement of *zakat*, which is giving alms to seven categories of people, including the poor.

**Table 4**  
**Distribution of Bumiputera Professionals in 1970, 1990 and 1998 (Percentage of Total Professionals)**

	1970	1990	1998
Accountant	6.8	11.5	15.2
Architect	4.3	23.6	28.7
Engineer	7.3	34.8	37.6
Medical Doctor	3.7	27.8	35.8

Source: Malaysia, *Fourth Malaysia Plan 1981-1985*, (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers, 1981), 60 and *Berita Harian*, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2001.

The efforts of the government to assist under-privileged Bumiputeras is laudable but if prolonged and applied randomly irrespective of socio-economic needs, then psychological effects such as mental and

and instructional materials, this policy could result setbacks in the mastery of Science and Mathematics among Malaysian children. The problem of a weak command of English has to be tackled at its root, by examining other factors related to pedagogy and culture.

### Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that cultural pluralism is very much alive in Malaysia but so also is racial polarization, which is very pronounced in the education system. There should be a serious effort to foster positive racial attitudes and interracial interactions and practices among people of the various racial groups. Even the multiracial learning and living experience in the public universities is unable to eradicate the primordial racial sentiments students had acquired while in the school system (Katz, 1976; Raghavan, 1975; Wazir, 2002). Studies (Yew, 1982; Saad, 1979) have shown that meaningful inter-ethnic interaction would heighten racial understanding, tolerance and trust. Therefore all possible opportunities ought to be provided and the best place would be the classroom and the best time is when the minds and hearts are still tender and innocent. However, the opportunity is lost in the Malaysian education system because of the nature of the national primary school system. Therefore, a common, single national school system that is acceptable to all has to be designed. In this system, students should be given the opportunity to learn their mother tongue and cultures. In addition, every Bumiputera student should be made to acquire a third language, either Tamil or Mandarin. This is important and already there is evidence that there is a demand to learn a third language by the Malays. There were about 24,000 Bumiputeras students studying in the national type Chinese primary schools in 2001. Clearly, the formation of a single national primary school system would require an amendment to the Education Act. This will be a test of the present generation's concern for the racial unity of the next generation.

If it is not possible to amend the Education Act, then the Ministry should think of curricular reforms involving all types of primary schools

physical dependency could develop. Viewed from another angle, the efforts of the government could mean providing crutches to the Bumiputeras to the extent that they might not be able to stand up by themselves in the future. This is especially so if they have developed the subsidized mentality, where they believe that they could rely on the government for everything, from education to economic assistance. This could lead to their inability to compete with the non-Bumiputeras. Therefore, the most recent policy of applying meritocracy for admission into the universities and opening up 10 percent of spaces for non-Bumiputeras in matriculation programmes and also in some science-stream schools throughout the country is a welcome move.

The Ministry of Education's latest policy of requiring the teaching of Science and Mathematics to be conducted in the English language beginning in 2003 in all the primary and secondary schools, including the national type Chinese and Tamil schools could be viewed in two different and opposite ways. Although the rationale for the introduction of the policy was to ensure Malaysia's viability and survival in the globalized economy through a good command of English, it could also be viewed positively as an effort to increase a sense of commonality between the different types of primary schools. It could also be considered as an effort to make the national schools a more attractive option for non-Bumiputera students. However, the move could also be viewed negatively because it is a regression from the previous policy of making Bahasa Malaysia, the official language, as the common language of instruction. In other words, all the previous efforts and success at making Bahasa Malaysia a common language of communication, knowledge and sciences up to the university level will go down the drain within a few years. Just when the citizens, especially the younger population are beginning to master this language, the policy is reversed. The Ministry should re-examine its policy because it does not seem logical and consistent that in order to solve the problem of the students' weaknesses in the command of English, one should teach Science and Mathematics in that language. Without proper educational planning with respect to teacher preparation

and more importantly, to improve the quality of the national schools so that there will be more participation from the non-Bumiputeras. Statistically, it seems easier for the Indians than the Chinese to integrate into the national schools (see Table 1).

The Ministry of Education should also study other educational systems in countries of similar nature as Malaysia, such as the United States, Canada, England and Wales, Singapore and the Scandinavian countries. Malaysia possesses a most unique education system because of its historical antecedents. According to the Minority Rights Group Report on the Chinese in South-East Asia (1992), "Malaysia has Southeast Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language system of education" (p. 2). Tan (1997) argues that the Chinese schools in Malaysia are unique because "even in Singapore, where the Chinese constitute more than 75 percent of the population and where Mandarin as a language is taught more extensively than before, schools teaching entirely in Chinese no longer exist" (p. 1). In most countries, there is only one type of national education system having a common medium of instruction, which is usually the language of the majority or the indigenous group. It is time for the Malaysian Chinese to consider the necessity of the younger generation to integrate into the existing society for their own well-being and prepare them as citizens of the country, rather than emphasizing their cultural differences. Attempts ought to be made to transform institutions that promote racial exclusiveness such as private higher education institutions, private religious secondary schools and independent, private Chinese secondary schools.

Finally, the most crucial problem would be the development of the citizenry for a pluralistic, democratic society. Education should be able to help students to acquire the knowledge, values and skills needed for making reflective, mature decisions consistent with the nation's ideals. Schools need to help students to develop clear, reflective and positive identification and attachment to their cultural community, the nation and the global society. Schools need to teach mutual respect since toleration alone is insufficient although necessary. As argued by Guttman (1995),

Mutual respect is a public as well as a private good. It expresses equal standing of every person as an individual and citizen. It also enables democratic citizens to discuss their political differences in a productive way by first understanding one another's perspectives and then by trying to find fair ways of resolving their disagreements.

Schools can teach mutual respect by creating curricula that recognize the multicultural heritage of the major civilizations of its people. To achieve this, students must experience a democratic classroom, a democratic school and a democratic society. They must be able to interact, discuss, constructively criticize and see others' perspectives.

It is well to heed the suggestion by Banks (1997) that to develop effective citizens in a pluralistic, democratic society, the structure of schools must be reformed. Teachers and schools ought to make changes in (a) *content integration*, with examples from the various cultures and groups to illustrate principles, theories and generalizations; (b) *the knowledge construction process* which is influenced by the racial, ethnic, and social classes positions of individuals and groups; (c) *prejudice reduction*, by using strategies to help students develop more democratic values and attitudes; (d) *an equity pedagogy*, that is possible through modifying teaching such that it will facilitate academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic and gender groups; and (e) *empowering school culture and social structure*, which means that the school ought to be considered as a system and to achieve the goal of effective citizens, the whole system and not just the parts, has to be restructured.

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