Chapter 10
Ethnicities and Education in Malaysia: Difference, Inclusions and Exclusions

Cynthia Joseph

Introduction

The politics of ethnic identification involving the three major ethnic groups of Malay-Muslims, Chinese and Indians have resulted in power imbalances and hierarchies along the various social, educational and economic dimensions. These power dynamics have in turn produced a Malaysian education and schooling system that is highly politicised and ethnicised.

This chapter examines the ways in which British colonial history, Malaysian state policies, contemporary ethnic politics and globalisation are played out within the Malaysian schooling and education system in relation to the inter and intra dynamics of the three major ethnic groups of Malay-Muslims, Chinese and Indians. Practices of social exclusion and inclusion within the education and schooling system will be discussed in relation to state policies such as the 1970 National Economic Policy (NEP), 1990 National Development Policy (NDP), 2001 New Vision Policy (NVP), and the National Education Policy. The ways in which the different types of Malaysian schools are ethnicised will be also examined. These schools vary in terms of Government funding, ethnic community support, resources and future educational opportunities. These schools are also used strategically by the Government and the ethnic collectives in the social and political positionings of these ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia.

The chapter begins with an overview of the politics of ethnicity in contemporary Malaysia as this provides the historical and socio-cultural context of this chapter.

Contemporary Malaysia: Politics of Ethnic Identification

The economic and social imbalance amongst the ethnic groups in Malaysia is a by-product of both British colonial legacy of more than 150 years and contemporary ethnic politics (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). A largely Malay society became transformed

Monash University, Australia

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into a culturally diverse society of Malays, Chinese and Indians as the three main ethnic groups during this colonial era. By 1957, just before Malaysia gained independence from the British, Malays were 49.8% of the population, Chinese 37.2% and Indians 11.3% (Jasbir & Mukherjee, 1993).

In contemporary Malaysia, the Malay-Muslims, the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, monopolise the public and government sector. The Malay-Muslims comprise 80% of the *Bumiputera* category. The *Bumiputeras* are Malays and other indigenous people who constitute 67.3% of contemporary Malaysian society. This group has indigenous status that guarantees attendant privileges. Malay ethnicity and the Malays' entitlement to special rights as *Bumiputeras* are constitutionally defined in Malaysia. All Malays are Muslims and speak Malay, which is the official and national language of the country. Islam, as the official religion of the state, is the most important factor in Malay identity and a significant social, political and ideological force influencing the Malays (Saravanamuttu, 2001).

The Chinese, a significant ethnic collective, monopolise the corporate business sector and constitute 24.5% of the Malaysian population. The Indians constitute 7.2% of the population and generally lag behind the Malays and Chinese economically, educationally and socially. There are exceptions to this general patterning.

These are the three major ethnic groups but other ethnic groups include the Eurasians, Chinese Babas, Melakan Chitties and others who trace their ancestries through intermarriage and cultural diffusion from inter-ethnic interactions centuries ago. Another group is the *Orang Asli,* who are the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia. Cultural plurality also exists in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

The official public and political discourse on identity in Malaysian society categorises each Malaysian as either *Bumiputera*, Chinese, Indian or Others. This official ethnic labeling determines certain rights and privileges within Malaysian society. These communal divisions have often resulted in contestation as well as encouraged consultation and compromise especially between the two major ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese. There are spaces for each of these ethnic collectives to exercise their dominance and power within contemporary Malaysia. There is the public or governmental space for the Malays/Bumiputeras and there is the corporate/private sector for the largest group of non-Malays, namely the Chinese. The numerical configuration of the Malays (53% of the population) with their political power and the Chinese (25%) with their economic power seems to be a compensatory mechanism for these two major ethnic collectives to power and profit-share in Malaysia (Maznah, 2005). Through the ethnic politics, a symbiotic relationship exists between these two major ethnic groups where neither groups alone influences political outcomes. The consolidation of the Malay-Chinese elite alliance is the key element in defining the context and parameters of political and economic power in Malaysia (Maznah, 2005). There are some exceptions to this, as any system that attempts to classify in this way has contradictions.

I use the term "politics of ethnic identification" to capture these differences and power imbalances along the various social, economic and educational dimensions that are linked with the official political ethnic categories in Malaysia. This politics of ethnic identification is inextricably intertwined with the politics of difference.

Difference is located within the intertwining of dimensions including gender, ethnicity and class within specific contexts (Mohanty, 1994). Difference here is not just attributed to diversity but to differences that are embedded within webs of power. Power according to Foucault, is a relation and inheres in difference (Foucault, 1980). A Foucauldian analysis of power uses the notion of discourse to examine practices through which power is exercised. Power is conceptualised as a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout society and enacted at every moment of interaction.

Contemporary theorists of ethnicity who work with the notion of difference (Brah, 1996; May et al, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1997) posit that the politics of identity is intertwined with the politics of difference in conceptualizing the notion of ethnicity. This conceptual framework is useful in understanding the ways in which ethnic differences and politics are played out within the schooling and education system in multicultural nations. Within such a framework, the notion of ethnicity involves the positioning of ethnic collectivities in terms of the social allocation of resources, with a context of difference to other groups (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1995). Ethnicity cross-cuts gender and class divisions, but at the same time involves the positing of a similarity (on the inside) and a difference (from the outside) that seeks to transcend these divisions (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1995). Ethnicity is socially constructed and discursively produced and always involves a political dimension.

The Malaysian educational and schooling systems are social sites where discourses of nationalism, the politics of ethnic identification and globalization intersect with the historical legacy of British colonialism. These educational sites are political where staff, educators and students negotiate the interplay of state's discourses, the discourses of education unique to that social site and other discourses. These social institutions also function to mediate the social, political and economic tensions of the wider society in complex and contradictory ways (Apple, 2003). The education and schooling systems are powerful political mechanisms used to maintain the status quo of the dominant groups within a specific society. This comes through the various educational policies implemented within the schooling system (Apple, 2003; Giroux, 2001). Giroux (2001) states that the imprint of the dominant collective within a particular society is inscribed in a whole range of school practices such as the official language, school rules, classroom social relations, and the selection and presentation of school knowledge. He further adds that this imprint is always mediated – sometimes rejected, sometimes confirmed. More often than not it is partly accepted and partly rejected.

Elements of Islam and the Malay culture are manifested through various aspects of the Malaysian school curriculum and education system. However, there are also processes of contestations and negotiations between the different ethnic groups that impact upon the Malaysian education system.

The Malaysian education and schooling system caters for a multiethnic population in a variety of ways through the different types of primary and secondary schools. There are three types of Malaysian primary schools in Malaysia: National schools (with a mix of ethnic groups in the student enrolments), National Type Chinese and National Type Tamil schools. The 2002 educational statistics indicate that 75% are National schools, 17% National Type Chinese and 7% National Type Tamil schools.

The types of Malaysian secondary schools are: Regular (a mix of ethnic groups), Residential and Science Colleges (mainly Malay-Muslim students), Religious (Muslim students), Independent Chinese Secondary Schools and Technical Schools. The 2002 educational statistics indicate that 89% are regular schools, 2% residential schools, 3% religious, and 5% technical schools. There are 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools and these schools do not operate within the national education system. There is a national primary school and secondary school curriculum as well as national public examinations for all schools to adhere to.

However, the national and national type schools are unequal in their share of resources and funding. Resource allocations in the Chinese and Tamil schools remain below that of the national schools as these schools are only partially financially aided by the Malaysian government.

The ways in which the curriculum and examination results are used for future educational pathways and opportunities varies for each of these ethnic groups. Markers of academic success are also ethnicised and vary for each ethnic group. The assessment and education and schooling system subordinates and marginalises particular ethnic groups. Access and opportunities to post-secondary and tertiary education is also highly ethnicised. Social inequalities are generated by these practices and processes.

The British Colonial Era: Divide and Rule

The ethnic schools in Malaysia were established during the colonial period. Early colonial practices towards education were determined by the identification of ethnicity with a specific economic role (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The British colonials were totally focused on economic imperialism and this governed their attitudes towards education (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The objectives of education during this period were for most children to receive a basic education in their own language that would prepare them for their allotted role in the colonial scheme. Europeans were to govern and administer, immigrant Chinese to labour in the tin mining industry and commercial sectors, immigrant Indians in the rubber plantation sector and Malays to till the rice paddy fields (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Only a few gained access to English schools and therefore to prestigious positions in government or European firms.

During the colonial era, the British colonial government and Christian missionary bodies sponsored English-medium schools in urban areas which generally enrolled middle-class and elite students from all ethnic groups. These English-medium schools were seen as a means for social mobility during the colonial era during which English was the basic language of colonial administration (Hirschman, 1979). There were also vernacular schools in Malay, Chinese and Tamil.

Hirschman (1979) states that the Malay vernacular schools were located in rural villages and was part of the British government's "paternalistic policy of not disturbing rural Malay society and culture" (p. 68). Chinese primary and secondary

schools was a product of the Chinese community in various towns in Malaysia. These schools were provided modest subsidies from the colonial government and were largely supported financially by private donations by the Chinese communities. Tamil schools were only at the primary school level. These schools were provided modest subsidies from the colonial government and managed by large rubber plantations that employed mainly Indian work force.

Malaysia became ethnically stratified due to the British colonial government's policy of unrestricted immigration, divide and rule policy and the practice of separate educational systems. The different ethnic groups were differentiated along social, economic and educational dimensions that resulted in social and economic hierarchies between and within the different ethnic groups. These social inequalities were also linked to the geographical positionings of the towns and states in Malaysia. An elite stratum of each ethnic community was created through the English schools and the lower socioeconomic group from each ethnic group through the vernacular schooling system. However, due to the capital accumulation of the ethnic Chinese collective and strong financial backing from the Chinese communities, the Chinese vernacular schools were in a much stronger position economically and socially in comparison to the Malay village schools and Tamil schools.

The more modern or urbanized states were the west coast states where most of the export enclave economy under colonial rule was concentrated and attracted most non-Malay immigrants (Hirshman, 1979). It was also in these areas that the colonial government concentrated most of its infrastructure development, such as roads, schools, hospitals and other public facilities. Chinese and Indians were more likely to live in towns and in close proximity to schools. Malays in the villages had less access to schools initially. Malays also had lower educational aspirations (Hirshman, 1979). There were also limited opportunities for Malay youths in the eastern and northern states from entering primary school and for Malay youth throughout the country from making the transition from primary to secondary school. There was also the cultural bias that made females less likely to progress through the educational system, especially at the initial stages, in all ethnic communities and regions. Access to future educational opportunities and economic prosperity was also differentiated along ethnic lines.

Independence of Malaysia: Nationalism and Ethnic Politics

The model of governance in Malaysia upon gaining independence in 1957 was a consociational model. The ruling structure is represented by an elite group who purportedly speaks for and makes claims on behalf of their ethnic communities (Ng et al., 2006). The British colonial government transferred power to the local elites in 1957 and the post-independence consociational Alliance. The Alliance, a coalition of ethnic-based parties – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) represented the elites from the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. There is unwritten but

unchallenged understanding that highest leadership will be Malay-Muslims from UMNO (the dominant partner in the multiethnic consociational arrangement). The Alliance was later replaced by the expanded Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) from the early 1970s. Since then, this coalition has been in power and the ruling political party in Malaysia. The power bargaining between the elites of the major ethnic groups and the British colonial government, and later on between the major ethnic groups resulted in social and political hierarchies where the Malay elites positioned themselves as the dominant political party and the elite Chinese and Indians as powerbrokers for their ethnic collectives in newly independent Malaysia. There were also economic and educational inequalities in this newly independent society where the Malays were still entrenched within the agricultural sectors in rural areas, the Chinese in the town sectors and the Indians both in the estate and town areas.

Upon gaining independence, the objective of the educational system was to foster national identity among the different ethnic communities. There were three major changes. Firstly, primary schooling in the four language media of English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil would continue with full governmental support and supervision. There was national curriculum for all schools. Secondary schooling with government sponsorship included the already existing English language stream and a new Malay language stream with the few Chinese-medium secondary schools being converted to English-medium in order to receive government support and recognition.

There was hardly any changes in the socio-economic position of Malays compared to the other ethnic groups during the first 12 years of independence in Malaysia. Unequal rates of urbanization and participation in the modern sector of the newly-independent Malaysia economy resulted in differential rates of educational achievement and income (Jasbir & Mukherjee, 1993). Instead of breaking down ethnic barriers, the processes of modernization and industralisation led to further ethnic differences and social inequalities. On the surface, ethnic relations were fairly cordial until 1969 ethnic riots.

The ethnic riots were due to the outcome of the 1969 Federal elections, wherein the party in Government, the Alliance party failed to capture the 2/3 majority which had previously enabled it to obtain constitutional amendments with ease (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The riots were also due to frustration between the Malays and non-Malays. Under the Alliance coalition government's laissez-faire regime, the Malay-Chinese income disparity increased. The Malays had not really achieved any significant progress in the economy with the institutionalisation of the Malays' special rights in the Malaysian constitution in 1957. In 1957, 97.5% of rice farmers were Malays, 66% of individuals employed in commerce and 72% of those in mining and manufacturing were Chinese (Brown, 1994). Malays had 2% equity in firms, the Chinese 22.8% and foreigners 62% in 1969. Free market and open competition in the economic spheres of Malaysia, without interference from the government allowed for the expansion and diversification of Chinese economic activities (Heng, 1996). The ethnic riots forced the Government to reassess the entire question of economic growth in relation to the vocal Malay demand for a greater share in the country's wealth (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). This led to the implementation of the National Economic Policy in the 1970s and 1980s.

The implementation of the National Economic Policy, a state affirmative action, was seen by the government as a way of eliminating poverty and removing the identification of economic function with particular ethnic groups, a situation that had arisen as a consequence of British colonialism (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). More recent social engineering policies such as the National Development Policy and New Vision Policy that have replaced previous affirmative action policies have only departed superficially from ensuring that the privileges of the *Bumiputera* remain untouched, even though they may vary in macroeconomic and fiscal emphases (Maznah and Wong, 2001).

The ethnic riots in May 1969 resulted in the urgency of strengthening Malay political will in order to improve the socio-economic position of the Malays. There were major economic and educational reforms put in place under the New Economic Policy (NEP) with the aim of fostering national unity through the creation of a more equitable society and eradicating the social divisions and stratification that were a result of the colonial era (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The government put in place a number of specific strategies and policies that placed the Malays in favoured positions of access to opportunities and advancement within the educational and employment sectors. Ethnic quotas favouring the *Bumiputeras* for employment in the government sector and in private enterprises, for stock ownership in corporations, and for government contracts were put in also place.

A minimum of 30% was set for *Bumiputera* (read Malay) participation in all economic activities that still holds today. However, *Bumiputeras* in most of these instances refer to the ethnic majority of this category, the Malays and exclude the other minority *Bumiputera* groups Chin (2001) provides a detailed description of the ethnic quota "All Malaysian business over a certain size had to allocate 30% of their shares, even it is sold at a discount to meet this shareholding requirement. State-funded education institutions, especially tertiary institutions could legally admit *Bumiputera* students with much lower grades than non-*Bumiputera* school leavers. Ninety percent of all government scholarships were awarded to *Bumiputera* students. Banks and other financial institutions were required to set aside a certain portion of their loan portfolios to *Bumiputera* businessmen. Certain categories of government contracts were only awarded to *Bumiputera* contractors" (p. 80). Furthmore, the Sedition Act and other legislations prohibit public and parliamentary debates and discussions of these "special positions". These ethnic quotas function as a mechanism for differential access to educational and economic opportunities between the *Bumiputeras* and non-*Bumiputeras*.

Education and Ethnic Politics: Inclusion and Exclusion

The National Economic Policy and related social engineering policies created a distinction between the *Bumiputeras* and non-*Bumiputeras* (which is synonymous with the Malays and non-Malays, given that 80% of the *Bumiputera* category are Malays).

The speeded-up transitions from English to Malay medium of instruction converted secondary schooling to Malay by 1982. There was a complete reversal of status between Malay and English within a space of a decade. This enabled Malay children to gain access to schooling. Malay became the sole medium of instruction in all secondary schools within the national system and in all public institutions of higher learning. The Chinese and Tamil primary schools were left intact with the Chinese language and Tamil language being the medium of instruction in these respective schools.

Another major change was the implementation of an ethnic quota in admission of students into tertiary education institutions. For example, public universities are required to reserve the ethnic quota of at least 60% of university places for Bumiputeras. High status professional courses such as medicine and engineering have a higher percentage in keeping with the government's goal of increasing the number of professional and middle-class Malays. The remaining quota within the public government universities are allotted to the best Chinese and Indian candidates in terms of educational merit. The best students within each ethnic group would gain access to public university education based on an ethnic quota. However, the academic achievement criteria used to establish the 'best students' is different for each ethnic group.

The Government also introduced various affirmative action policies to reduce inter-ethnic differences in educational attainment. These included special scholarships to *Bumiputera* students and the establishment of special secondary schools (such as the residential science schools and MARA junior science colleges) and programmes (such as the pre-university matriculation programs) to prepare *Bumiputera* students for the professional and technical fields. These residential science schools and junior science colleges have better physical facilities and smaller student-teacher ratio in comparison to the regular schools. These schools provide the supply of suitable *Bumiputera* candidates in the Science and Technology based courses in the Malaysian and overseas universities. The Ministry of Education and universities have matriculation or pre-university foundation courses for *Bumiputera* students. These programs provide *Bumiputera* students with an additional entry route to science and technology based faculties in Malaysian universities. The Malaysian Higher School Education certificate program in the Malaysian government schools also provides a route to the public universities. This 2-year program is open to all Malaysian students who qualify based on the results of the end of the secondary schooling public examination. However, there are resource disparities between the schools or institutions that offer these two types of programs. Furthermore, there are differences in degrees of difficulty, length of the program and the ways in which these two programs are used as to differentiate access to tertiary education along ethnic dimensions.

The Malaysian Government used and still adopts these educational policies to control access to higher education because education at the tertiary level is perceived as a means to social mobility (Joseph, 2006). This preferential treatment of *Bumiputeras* within the education system has made competition among the non-*Bumiputeras,* especially from the Chinese, very keen.

These educational practices resulting from the affirmative action policies still continue to rouse much emotions and controversy in Malaysia, especially between the Malays and the Chinese. The national language of Malay language has to some extent served an integrative role in the multiethnic Malaysian society and contributed to inter-ethnic communication. However, the Malay language is also seen as an advantage to the Malays as it is their mother tongue and a disadvantage to the non-Malays who were more comfortable with English language instruction and their own mother tongue languages. The various curriculum reviews within the education system have also been seen as a political strategy in putting Malay culture and values and Islamic religion in the centre of the schooling system so as to represent Malaysian identity as Malay-Islamic identity. In the secondary schools, the subject Islamic Studies is compulsory for all Muslim students. The non-Muslim students do the subject, Moral Education rather than having the option of choices of variety of religious studies. Darwin's evolutionary theory is not taught in schools as it is considered contradictory to the Islamic belief in Allah as the creator of the Universe (Lee, 2001). A study on the textbooks used in Malaysian secondary schools shows that the Malay language and History subjects tend to overplay the role of Malay, Malay culture and traditions, instead of being sensitive to the national needs of unity and integration (Santhiram, 1997).

The politics of ethnic identification at the national level is also translated into education, academic, research and management practices within schooling and higher education institutions. There is a Malay bias of bureaucracy within the Education Ministry as in all other Government sectors due to the NEP policies (Joseph, 2006). There is limited opportunity for public input regarding the education system. Furthermore government decisions are influenced by the push and pull of demands from different ethnic blocs, voting blocs and various interest groups. All state actions necessarily benefit some social interests and disadvantage others. The national level of governance with its lack of transparency, money politics, and corruption also impacts on the practices within the Ministry of Education.

Within the implementation of this affirmative action policy, a new generation of middle class, professionals, capitalist and entrepreneurs Malays was created. The Malaysian Government was able to eliminate in a single generation the educational inequalities during the colonial era that had fostered the stereotype that Malay culture were lazy and did not value education. However, this was done at the expense of further stratifying the Malaysian society along ethnic and class lines. As discussed earlier, the Malay-Muslims monopolise the public and government sectors and the Chinese the corporate and private sectors. The Indians and other minorities generally lag behind these two ethnic collectives socio-economic and education sectors.

While the objectives of the NEP was for the redistribution of resources and growth benefits so as to achieve greater equality since there were more non-Malays in the higher economic classes, the NEP intensified the politics of ethnic identification given that the redistribution was and still is along ethnic lines. Critics argue that the redistribution would have been more effective with less ethnic divisiveness had these social engineering policies been along economic class (Maznah, 2005). A 1986 study by Ozay Mehmet and Yip Hat Hoong in Malaysian

universities showed that only 12% of the *Bumiputera* students surveyed and who received government scholarships came from poor families (Maznah, 2005). It is the elite Malays and non-Malays with connections who have benefited more from the policy than poor Malays.

The NEP which was originally seen as a state policy to correct the economic and social imbalance amongst the ethnic groups that resulted from the colonial era is now been being capitalized by a small section of the *Bumiputera*/Malay community in terms of corporate enhancement. The NEP has also created a sense of complacency amongst the *Bumiputera* and Malay community due to the economic and educational benefits. This has also resulted in a lack of global competitiveness and professionalism amongst this group.

The elites and the middle class of all ethnic groups benefited from the rapid industralisation, urbanization and economic liberalization in the late 1980s and 1990s. In addition, the NEP also provided economic and educational benefits to the Malays. The Chinese have the historical capital accumulation. The Indians do not have the economic clout as the Chinese had or the affirmative action policy for the Malays. Thus, there was a widening of the economic and social gap between the Indians and the two major ethnic groups of Malays and Chinese during the 1980s and 1990s. There was also a widening of the gap within the Malay ethnic collective between the elite, middle class Malays and the poor Malays. The widening of the intra-ethnic inequality gap most especially among the Malays/*Bumiputera* and the Indians, and the inter-ethnic gap between the Indians and, Malays and Chinese has intensified over these last few years. Maznah (2005) highlights some of the social inequalities that are currently prevalent in Malaysia: regional differences, federal-state power imbalance, marginalization of non-Malay groups of *Bumiputera*, the unaddressed plight of the Indians and the dispossession of a growing class of non-citizen migrant workers.

Having set the socio-cultural and political contexts for the politicization of education in Malaysia, the following section of this chapter provides an analysis of different types of Malaysian schools. A brief discussion will also be provided on the access to educational opportunities at the post-secondary and tertiary levels. This is examined within the context of the social inclusions and exclusions in relation to the Malaysian ethnic politics.

"Malaysian" National Schools: Multiethnic Spaces

There are 5,756 national primary schools and 1,802 regular secondary schools in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2005). The medium of instruction in these schools is the Malay language. All these schools follow the national school curriculum and national examinations. The national examination at the end of the secondary schooling is used as an entrance to pre-university and matriculation programs. However, these schools differ in relation to their geographical location, ethnic mix, ethnic politics and academic achievement.

There tends to be a mix of the different ethnic groups in these schools. However, this ethnic mix is also dependent on the geographical locations of these schools in terms of towns, cities and states. Urbanization and industrialization also plays an important role in this. For example, the state of Penang, a highly urbanized state has an almost equal number of Malays and Chinese in the state and this numerical representation is reflected in some of the schools in Penang. The East Coast states of Malaysia, Kelantan and Terengganu which are less urbanized than the West coast states are predominantly Malay states and this is also reflected in the student and teacher demographics of the schools in the state.

While all these schools are fully funded by the Malaysian government, there is also an urban-rural divide in terms of physical and human resources. The urban schools tend to perform better on the national examinations compared to the rural schools due to better physical and human resources in urban schools. Schools in the rural areas also have difficulties in getting proper qualified teachers. The Ministry of Education over the years has made it compulsory for new teacher graduates to serve between 3 and 5 years in rural areas so as to ensure these schools obtain professional teachers who are well-qualified in order to improve the levels of education and achievement in these areas. However, there is still a problem of getting fully qualified teachers in the areas of Sciences and Languages for the schools in rural areas.

There is a lack of data available in relation to the ethnic distribution of academic achievement in the different types of Malaysian schools as this is seen as being ‘sensitive’ by the Malaysian government. In Malaysia, public or academic discourses on issues to do with ethnicity, religion or other related controversial issues are considered as sensitive and prohibited if it is perceived to directly or indirectly challenge political stability. Thus, there is a lack of public debates and critical academic research that examines ethnic and social inequalities within the Malaysian schooling and education system.

Joseph (2003) in her ethnographic study of an urban girls’ school in the state of Penang found in her research site, most of the top academic achievers and school leaders were Chinese girls. The Malay girls were located in the average and low achieving classes and the Indian girls were located mostly in the average achieving classes. The school culture also has to be considered in her study given that most of the school teachers in this school were Chinese teachers at that time. It is problematic to make general conclusions about the ethnic distribution of academic achievers within such schools. However, given the lack of such official data, the author based on her ethnographic study (Joseph, 2006) and her professional years as a teacher and university lecturer within the Malaysian education system has noted that in such Malaysian national schools where there is a reasonable mix of the different ethnic groups, the Chinese tend to be top achievers. Her study also indicated that the Malay students in the top achieving classes tend to be less competitive in comparison to the Chinese girls. The Malay girls in her study said in their interviews that as members of the indigenous group, they do not work hard and were not as competitive as the Chinese girls because they were confident they would get the scholarships for further studies due to the affirmative action policy for the *Bumiputeras*. There is a tendency for some Malay students in these schools

to think along these lines as there is a lack of competitiveness and meritocracy within the schooling system in relation to access to tertiary education and scholarship opportunities. Most of the Malays in these secondary schools tend to be those who are average academic achievers in the primary schools as most of the top Malay achievers usually go off to special residential colleges and secondary science schools. While Joseph's study (2003) does not provide a general representation of the dynamics of such schools, her study does provide an insight into some of the politics of schooling in Malaysia.

These national primary and secondary schools are complex in the ethnic distribution of academic success and future educational opportunities. Normative notions of academic success with markers of pro-school behaviors such as high grades, respect for teachers and education, capacity for hard work, self-discipline, high motivation, ambition, good behaviour, deference for teachers and school authority are very much emphasized in all Malaysian schools. There is also a strong focus on academic excellence and high grades in Malaysian schools. However, there is ethnic bias in the present education system that is not based on merit in terms of government scholarships and future educational opportunities at the post-secondary and tertiary levels as *Bumiputeras*-Malays have more opportunities at these. As discussed earlier, they also have a different entry route through the Matriculation programs into tertiary level education following on from the affirmative action policies for this ethnic collective. Thus, the discourses of schooling in Malaysia are located within these multiple contradictory discourses of normative academic success, ethnic politics and the schooling culture of the particular schools.

Residential Science Schools and Colleges: Malay Privilege

There are special provisions made for the *Bumiputeras* within the national education system through the MARA junior science colleges and the residential secondary science schools. These schools were built in the 1970s and 1980s so as to increase the number of *Bumiputeras* in the fields of Science and Technology, and the Applied Sciences. This was also done within the context of the affirmative action policies for the Malays/*Bumiputeras*. Educational statistics in relation to ethnic distribution in schools and academic achievement is considered sensitive within the Malaysian context and is not available in the public domain. The schools were also to provide a competitive education for rural Malays who were disadvantaged both economically and socially due to the British colonial education system.

The Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Malay Indigenous People's Trust Council; commonly abbreviated as MARA) is a Malaysian government agency that was formed in 1966 under the Rural and National Development Ministry to aid, train, and guide Bumiputra (Malays and other indigenous Malaysians) in the areas of business and industry. MARA is now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Entrepreneur

& Cooperative Development. Initially MARA's economic and educational policies and practices were targeted at Malays in the rural areas. However, access and entrance to MARA Science colleges was extended to all Malays despite their socio-economic status.

There are 32 MARA Junior Science colleges in Malaysia with a total enrolment of 20,900 students and 2,171 teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). In addition to these MARA Junior Science Colleges, there are also the fully residential science secondary schools that have mainly *Bumiputera* students. There are currently 54 such schools in Malaysia.

The high academically achieving *Bumiputeras* are given the opportunity to apply for entry into MARA Junior Science Colleges and Residential Science Secondary Schools at the end of their primary schooling in Primary Year 6. These high academically achieving *Bumiputeras* are segregated from the rest of the communities, leaving the average and less academically inclined *Bumiputeras* in national secondary schools. This ethnic division is further exacerbated in Form Six where *Bumiputeras* attend matriculation colleges for separate entrance into the local universities.

A 10% quota allocation has been provided to non-*Bumiputeras* to attend these MARA Junior Science Colleges and the residential science secondary schools. However, generally this quota is hardly near the 10% mark.

The school culture in these MARA Junior Science Colleges and residential science secondary schools is generally Malay and Islamic given that most of the students are Malay-Muslims. Most of the teachers also tend to be Malay-Muslims. These schools have the very good physical facilities and resources with small classes. There are also extra tuition or coaching classes after the formal schooling hours with these classes being conducted by the teachers. There is also moral support for these students to ensure that they perform extremely well in the national examinations. The recent 2006 Budget has allocated RM90 million for the construction of two new Mara Junior Science College (MRSM) and for the purchase of equipment for existing MRSM facilities.

These MARA and Science Schools have created an exclusive and elitist space for the education of high achieving *Bumiputera* who mainly Malay students. In the early 1980s and 1990s before the 1997 Asian financial/economic crisis, most of the top Malay achievers in these schools would be sent overseas on extremely well-funded government scholarship to England or the United States to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The socioeconomic status of their families did not matter and this resulted in the elite Malays benefiting more from this system than the rural and poor Malays that this system was originally designed for.

These schools have been instrumental in creating the capitalist, entrepreneurial middle class and professional Malays in the country. In this sense, these special schools for the *Bumiputeras* and Malays have been successful in addressing the social and educational inequalities from the British colonial era. However, on another level these schools have not only created the inter-ethnic divisions but intra-ethnic divisions that are classed.

Chinese Vernacular Schools: Visible and Powerful Spaces

Malaysia is the only country outside of Greater China today where education using Chinese Mandarin as the medium of instruction is available. Based on 2003 education statistics, there are 1,284 National-Type Chinese Primary schools, 74 National-Type Secondary schools that were formerly Chinese schools and 60 Chinese secondary schools that do not operate within the national education system. There are approximately 600,000 students in the Chinese primary schools, 99,000 in Chinese secondary schools in the national system and 60,000 in Independent Chinese schools.

The Chinese schools in Malaysia began as schools serving the Chinese migrant community in the 19th century. The Chinese in colonial Malaysia set up their own community-funded schools, drawing on a tradition of self-reliance in education which can be traced historically to China (Tan, 2000). These Chinese schools continued to teach essentially in Mandarin and to cater predominantly to ethnic Chinese children during the colonial and early post-independence era.

Tan (2000) argues that a mix of inter-related demographic, socio-cultural, economic and political factors have enabled the Chinese schools in Malaysia to negotiate the terms for their survival through the different phases of their history. There was a transformation of the Chinese from an immigrant society to an integral component of a multiethnic nation with the provision of citizenship to the Chinese within the constitutional framework of the Federation of Malaya and the Independence struggles in the 1950s. The Chinese community consolidated their efforts in establishing a stable and significant presence in the education scenario through these Chinese schools. The Chinese community invested time, energy and money into the founding of these schools. They were and still are motivated by a pride in their culture and language (Tan, 2000).

The British colonial government developed multiethnic schools as part of the decolonization process for post-war Malaya. These schools were seen as agents of integration and English was the medium of instruction (Tan, 2000). This new emphasis resulted in fears amongst the Chinese community and a move was launched to save these Chinese schools through the *Dong Jiao Zong* movement. *Dong Jiao Zong* (DJZ) is the Chinese acronym commonly used to refer jointly to the United Chinese School Committees' Association *(Dong Zong)* and United Chinese School Teachers' Association (*Jiao Zong)*. The DJZ is responsible for the administration and management of 1,287 Chinese primary schools in Malaysia (Collins, 2005). They also manage and raise funds for the Independent Chinese secondary schools, the New Era College and supplement the inadequate finding that is provided at the government level. The DJZ is a powerful organization in that it has strong historical and communal links with the Chinese all over Malaysia. The DJZ movement that was initially seen as a resistance towards colonial policy developed into an alternative vision of a multiethnic nation in which different languages and cultures thrived (Tan, 2000). In the negotiations between the different ethnic political parties during the independence struggles, the Chinese politicians and *Dong Jiao Zong* leaders were given an assurance that the Chinese were given a

chance to preserve their schools, language and culture. This was also seen as a strategic political move on the part of the Malay political party of the Alliance to garner votes from the Chinese community for a win in the first elections. The large number of 1,381 Chinese schools with a total enrolment of 319,879 students and 8,417 teachers in 1956 was also vital in the continuation of these schools (Tan, 2000).

The early post-independence period was a time during which issues of nationalism within the context of the education and schooling system were becoming more important. There was a move towards a common medium of instruction, common curriculum and examinations in integrating the existing schools into a national system. The Malaysian Chinese Education movement, *DJZ*, during this period resisted the Alliance government's efforts to erode the Chinese schools. The tensions within and between the ruling parties of the Alliance, namely the Malay party UMNO and the Chinese party MCA finally resulted in the most of the Chinese secondary schools being converted to schools teaching in English and receiving full Government aid. The Chinese primary schools remained within the national system and continued to receive Government aid. The Chinese primary schools continue to be a source of political tension in communal politics in Malaysia.

There have been three Malaysian Education Acts (1957, 1961, 1995/6) that have reduced the role of Mandarin in the national education system (Cheong, 2006). At present, these National Type primary Chinese schools (pupils aged 5–11) are the only schools in the national education system that use Mandarin as a medium of instruction. Each Act has been seen by Chinese educationalists as obstructing the continuation of a Chinese identity in Malaysia (Collins, 2005). The DJZ has been instrumental in raising the Chinese communities' awareness of threats posed by the government's education policies (Cheong, 2006). For example, the DJZ reaction to the 1961 Education Act that stipulated that in order for Chinese schools to gain acceptance into the national system and therefore continue to receive government funding, these Chinese schools must stop teaching in Chinese (Collins, 2005). There have been various other incidents. In 1987, the then Minister of Education promoted 100 non-Mandarin educated Chinese teachers in Chinese primary schools (Collins, 2005). This was seen as a move by the government to undermine the status of Chinese medium schools because these teachers were not literate in Mandarin. The DJZ mobilized support amongst the Chinese community and the various Chinese political parties for a protest (Collins, 2005).

In 2002, the Government proposed the use of English as the language for the teaching of Mathematics and Science in all National and National-type primary schools. There was a complete turn in the post-independence and postcolonial discourse of Malay national language as a symbol of nationalism and unity to a new discourse that emphasizes the importance of English as an international language to be competitive in the globalised world economy. The Government warned the DJZ that action will be taken if there was incitement of racial sentiment leading to national disharmony. However, in this instance, unlike 1987, the dominant Chinese coalition parties within the ruling party while being sympathetic to the issue did not back the DJZ. A compromise was then made between the Malay and Chinese ruling parties due to the approaching national elections. The children at the Chinese

primary schools would learn Maths and Science both in Mandarin and English. The DJZ rejected this and this was seen as threat to the economic prosperity and societal stability of the nation.

There is a strong belief amongst the Chinese community and educationalists that in order for Chinese culture to survive and flourish in Malaysia, these schools are essential as the transmitter of Chinese culture to the next generation (Chin, 2001; Collins, 2005). Much emphasis is placed on academic achievement and on the Chinese culture, traditions and language in these schools. In this way, the presence of these Chinese schools has also contributed in significant ways to the development of human resources within the Chinese business community.

These Chinese schools are seen as a success story in terms of providing a visible identity marker, strong ethnic pride and a powerful educational institution for the Chinese community. The strong economic positioning of the Chinese ethnic collective during the pre and post-independence era and in present day Malaysia have enabled these schools to thrive successfully due to the economic and cultural patronage of the Chinese community, in particular the business community.

Tamil Vernacular Schools: Poor Schools, Marginalized Spaces

The development of Tamil schools in the Malaysian context must be understood against the backdrop of social history, and economic and political marginalisation during the British colonial era and contemporary Malaysia.

The South Indians Tamils constitute about 80% of the total Indian population. This is due to the colonial labour policy wherein the British colonial government brought in large numbers of cheap and docile Indian labour from South India to work the plantations and government projects (Santhiram, 1999). They were grouped into separate collie lines in the estates and formed a poor landless rural class (Santhiram, 1999). They also formed the bulk of manual labour that was involved in the construction and development of the infrastructural network of roads and railways in the country. They were also the backbone of the public utilities sector like the Public Works Department and the Sanitation Department in the major towns (Santhiram, 1999). They were also brought in to counter-balance the growing numbers, influence and unequal competition of the commercially astute Chinese who were considered too devious for the Malays (Sandhu, 1969, p. 58). The British practice of discriminatory ethnic politics until the 1920s excluded the educated Indians and intellectuals from the occupational opportunities in Malaya.

The Indian community in present day Malaysia has also been characterized by a relatively large social divide between the predominantly labour class and the professional and business class. Indians own less that 2% of the nation's wealth even though the Indians constitute about 8% of the country's population of 22 million (Kuppuswamy, 2003). They also make up less than 5% of successful university applicants.

Spaeth (2000) in quoting, Ramachandran, argues that: "Indians have neither the political nor the economic leverage to break out of their vicious cycle of poverty … if

their problems are not arrested and reversed, it is almost certain they will emerge as an underclass". He further adds that "Affirmative action-type quotas for the Malay population, along with a political system controlled by the Malays and Chinese, make many Indian Malaysians feel like third-class citizens".

Muzaffar (1993) attributes the current political and economic status of Indians in Malaysia to the effects of British colonialism. Due to low wages and harsh and brutal working conditions in the plantations during the colonial times, it was difficult for a large segment of the Indian community to move into the middle class. Muzaffar (1993) contrasts this to the Chinese community, which had more mobility between the different sectors of the economy and this resulted in the Chinese becoming well entrenched in the middle and upper strata of colonial society after a generation or two.

Tamil schools in colonial British Malaya were established in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The colonial government's participation in Tamil education was minimal and there was no provision beyond primary education was considered necessary as a basic knowledge of agriculture and handicrafts were considered sufficient for the needs of an Indian labourer (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The ways in which the Tamil education developed under colonial rule further intensified the existing divisions in Indian society, separating the middle and upper class, who were primarily urban and English-educated from the rural and urban poor (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

There are about 500 odd Tamil schools in present day Malaysia – with more than half of these schools being in deplorable conditions. In 2001, there were 527 such schools with a student enrolment of 90,502 students. These Tamil schools are mainly located in the rubber and palm oil estates but the conditions of these schools are deplorable and many lack basic necessities such as libraries, tables and chairs. These schools are patronized by the poorer sections of the Indian-Tamil community both of the estate background and the urban sector (Santhiram, 1999). There has been a decline in the enrolment of children in Tamil schools due to the rapid development of agricultural land banks between 1990 and 2000 that has resulted in the large scale migration of plantation labour to urban areas.

Santhiram (1999, p. 36) provides a description of the education in Tamil schools during the British colonial era

> Initially, a Tamil primary education of a minimum 4 years' duration was available for the Indians under the auspices of the missionaries, estate managements or the government. Estate Tamil schools which formed the bulk of these schools were in the main, makeshift structures. Teaching was often carried out in a multiple class environment. The facilities were very poor and Spartan at the most. Primary textbooks were Indian in orientation on account of their importation from India. Anyone in the estate who was literate in the Tamil Language could double up as a teacher in these Tamil schools.

Tamil education, unlike Chinese vernacular primary and secondary schools, was provided for in the primary level only. Most of the children on leaving these Tamil schools were absorbed into the working environment of the estates (Santhiram, 1999). The parents who were mostly illiterate did not see the value of a secondary education. They saw their lives in the estates much more comfortable to the harsh

and impoverished life without any educational opportunities they left behind in South India. However, given the state of these schools in comparison to other schools in Malaysia, "the estate schools often become ghetto schools for an underprivileged group" (Rothermund & Simon, 1986, p. 142).

Upon gaining independence, Tamil education was streamlined into a 6-year primary education (Santhiram, 1999). Pupils from Tamil primary schools had to attend a year of Remove Classes to gain proficiency in the medium of instruction of English and later on Malay in the secondary schools. The Chinese community and educationalists who had a much stronger economic and political positionings than the Indians within the newly independent Malaysia protested strongly against various nationalistic moves by the government such as the making the Malay language the main medium of instruction in all schools. The Indians, who lacked this economic and political power just tagged along without any of the vigor shown by the Chinese and Malays (Santhiram, 1999). The New Economic Policy (NEP) that favoured the Malays and *Bumiputeras* further marginalised majority of the Tamils and Tamils schools.

The quality of most Tamil schools is very much below the standards of the National Type and National Type Chinese schools in terms of teaching quality and infrastructure. These schools sometimes lack even the basic facilities such as a proper school building, adequate classrooms, playing fields, toilet facilities and libraries. These schools have a higher percentage of untrained, temporary teachers compared to other types of schools. As most of these schools are on private land, they tend only get partial government funding. And unlike the Chinese schools that have the financial backing of the community, the Indian-Tamil community does not have that economic clout. Santhiram (1999, p. 51) states that the culture of poverty at home combined with the poor facilities of the school provide an educational climate that can only be described as hopeless.

In recent times, the plight of Indians in Malaysia from the lower economic status has not changed considerably. This group is not performing academically within the schooling system and is under-represented in the tertiary educational institutions. They continue to be concentrated in the lower paying jobs. There is a widening intra-ethnic gap between those from the lower socio-economic groups and the Indian elites. The historical marginalized positionings of Indians during the colonial era coupled with the present day marginalized positionings of this ethnic collective has created an underclass of Indian-Tamils in contemporary Malaysia. This cohort of Malaysian society is multiply disadvantaged at the educational and economic levels.

The Indian political party in Malaysia, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which is part of the then Alliance and present dominant ruling coalition has been the ethnic Indian collective's sole representative since independence. This party does not have the number or economic clout and are also weak in influencing the political process in Malaysia (Nagarajan, 2004). Arumugam (2002) argues that the total weakness of these Tamil schools and the lack of governmental support and intervention in improving these deplorable conditions in these schools is a clear indication of this Indian political party's bargaining power within the ruling party.

There have been debates in recent years as to the benefits of these Tamil schools. Many middle and upper-middle class Indians/Tamils hold the view that Tamil schools are useless. There are questions raised as to why the Tamils/Indians cannot organize their education like the Chinese. The Chinese and Indians have different trajectories of history in colonial Malaya and later Malaysia. The leadership and economic positionings of the Chinese and Indian communities are also very different in terms of its power brokerage within the larger Malaysian society.

These Tamil schools form part of a struggle by Tamil cultural and Tamil language advocates in Malaysia to sustain and maintain the history of the Tamil language as one of the oldest surviving languages (Arumugam, 2002). The Tamil language also represents an important ethnic marker of the Malaysian-Tamils who constitute about 80% of the Indian population in Malaysia. Thus, these Tamil schools are a matter of pride and dignity for the Tamil community. However, the Tamil schools are located within the marginalisation of a large proportion of Tamils in Malaysia which has its roots in colonialism, the plantation economy, ethnic politics and Tamil weakness to influence political decisions and state neglect (Nagarajan, 2004). These Tamil schools have not been effective as a social and educational institution in improving the social and economic positionings of the community. The Tamil education system can only be improved through concerted initiatives by the community and political leaders, and state intervention. These initiatives should focus on improving early childhood education, modernizing learning facilities and the school environment, and improving the professionalism of educators within the Tamil schooling system.

Religious Schools: Educational Spaces of Islam

In 2005, there were 55 Religious secondary schools in Malaysia. There is lack of academic literature on these schools. An Islamic and Malay culture prevails in these schools given that most of the teachers and students are Malays and all are Muslims. These schools are fully funded by the government and adhere to the national school curriculum and national examinations. In addition to the regular subjects such as Mathematics, Sciences, Languages and Humanities, these schools also offer specific religious subjects such as Arabic language, Islamic Religious Knowledge and Quranic skills. High and average achieving students from these schools tend to go into the matriculation programmes as with the students in the residential schools. These schools prepare students for Islamic studies and professional courses at the tertiary level either at the local universities or overseas universities. A number of these students are also seen as potential professionals in Islamic understanding and knowledge. These schools are seen as providing human resource for Islamic spaces within the Malaysian system such as the Islamic legal system, Islamic banking and Islamic education. These schools are also seen as producing future knowledgeable and responsible Islamic missionaries.

Orang Asli (Original Peoples)

In discussing the inter and intra ethnic dynamics of the education and schooling system in Malaysia, a special mention has to be made of the indigenous peoples of Peninsula Malaysia, the *Orang Asli*. The term *Orang Asli* translates as 'original peoples' or 'first peoples' (Nicholas, 2002). In 1999, they represented 0.5% of the national population. The *Orang Asli* are not a homogenous people. The State for administrative and political purposes officially classified 18 ethnic sub-groups under the collective term (Nicholas, 2002). The *Orang Asli* were the targets of Christian missionaries and subjects of anthropological research during the British colonial era (Nicholas, 2002). Since 1961, the Malaysian state has adopted a policy of integration of the *Orang Asli* into the wider Malaysian society. Endicott and Dentan (2004, p. 2) state that this policy of integration has come to mean "bringing them into the market economy, asserting political control over them, and assimilating them into the Malay-Muslim ethnic category". Endicott and Dentan (2004) argue that the political reason for absorbing *Orang Asli* into the Malay population would eliminate a category of people arguably "more indigenous" than Malays. However, most of the *Orang Asli* have strongly resisted government pressures to turn them into Malays (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). During the periods of increased development and modernization, there was and still continues to be encroachments and appropriation of *Orang Asli* traditional lands and economies by the State and business concerns. There continues to be much tension between the *Orang Asli* in relation to this community's own leadership and practices, and the Department of *Orang Asli* Affairs, the State appointed custodian of this community. The *Orang Asli* have experienced considerable social stress and marginalization in the appropriation and exploitation of their traditional territories and resources (Nicholas, 2002). Most *Orang Asli* still live on the fringes of Malaysian society, cut off from most social services, poorly educated, making a meager living (Endicott & Dentan, 2004).

This community has also been marginalised in relation to access and future opportunities to education. The Malaysian Government through the Department of *Orang Asli* Affairs developed a three-tiered educational program aimed at preparing *Orang Asli* children to enter the national education system (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). Children attended the village school during the first 3 years. The teachers in these schools were provided by the Department of *Orang Asli* Affairs and were generally not trained and had a low level of education themselves. These children would then go on to central primary schools in larger *Orang Asli* communities where they could finish their primary schooling. The teachers in these schools were Malays, provided by the Ministry of Education. Students who passed their final primary school examination would then go on to the normal government secondary schools in nearby rural or urban areas. The drop-out rates for *Orang Asli* children is very high in the primary schools (Endicott & Dentan, 2004).

There has been a mismatch between *Orang Asli* cultures and the Malaysian education system. *Orang Asli* children are not fluent in the medium of instruction in schools, the Malay language. The schooling curriculum that centres around the needs and experiences of urban children from other ethnic groups does not take into

consideration the experiences of *Orang Asli* children. There is also a lack of trained teachers in the remote *Orang Asli* schools. The very few *Orang Asli* children who go on to secondary schools are faced with a number of challenges in adjusting to the new schooling and cultural environment. Most of the teachers do not know much about *Orang Asli*. These students also face harassment from other students. Their parents also encounter financial problems in supporting their children through the secondary schooling.

Education for the *Orang Asli* has to move beyond the Government's objectives of total assimilation into the Malay society. There has to be an educational program moulded to the special needs and cultural experiences of these peoples. There is a need for a curriculum that both builds on their traditions and experiences as well as prepares them for living in the wider community.

Access and Opportunities to Future Educational Opportunities

Social and educational inequalities have been created through the vernacular education system comprising of government aided Chinese and Tamil primary schools, community funded Chinese secondary schools, the national primary and secondary schools as well as the residential science schools and MARA junior science colleges and the other types of Malaysian schools. These inequalities are further exacerbated at the post-secondary and tertiary education levels.

Students upon completion of their secondary schooling have various options that are dependent on their academic achievement and family financial background. Students with average and high grades can choose between the pre-university courses at the matriculation colleges (specifically for Malays) or the Malaysia Higher School Education certificate program in the government schools as pathways to the public universities. Students who can afford the fees can also choose to go into the various private colleges. And there is also the option of getting out into the Malaysian workforce. All these different pathways upon completion of secondary schooling are also located within the discourses of ethnic politics in Malaysia.

All public Malaysian universities are fully-funded by the Malaysian Government. These universities have been the site for ethnic and demographic transformation since the affirmative action policies were implemented in the 1970s. Most students and senior ranking academics are *Bumiputeras* and Malays. There is a dominant discourse of Malay-*Bumiputera* bureaucracy within Malaysian public universities as most of the university staff are *Bumiputera* Malay-Muslims. There are spaces for the non-Malays within these institutions but again this is political and strategic to ensure the dominancy and power of the *Bumiputera*-Malay ethnic collective.

In the late 1990s with the massification of higher education and the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the Malaysian government encouraged the private sector to play an active role in the provision of higher education (Lee, 2004). The number of private educational institutions has increased from 156 institutions in 1992 to 707 in 2002 (Lee, 2004). Most of these private educational institutions are profit-oriented

enterprises. These educational institutions within the private sector are located within a hierarchy with the financially successful and top colleges having a majority of Chinese students and top management and teaching staff members. This liberalization of government policies towards private higher education is also due to the lack of places (especially for the Chinese and other non-Malays) in the public institutions of higher learning to meet the increasing demands as well as the ethnic quota system. There are also significant numbers of Malaysian-Chinese students who are studying in tertiary education institutions in Singapore due to this ethnic quota within the Malaysian education system that does not reward academic excellence for the Chinese and other non-Malay students in terms of limited choices and places in degree programs like medicine, engineering and law.

Future educational opportunities and pathways for Malaysian students are also deeply embedded within the politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia and these are increasingly linked to class in recent times.

Politics of Exclusion and Inclusion: Contemporary Malaysia

The official discourses of education and schooling in the Malaysian context has always been one of national integration and national identity since independence in 1957. The education system aims to give education to the masses as is noted in the National Philosophy of Education and various education policies in Malaysia. Education is represented as the arbiter of social equity and the instrument of social reconstruction in these discourses. However, after 49 years of independence, 37 years since the 1969 ethnic riots and the implementation of the National Economic Policy in 1970, the 1990 National Development Policy, 2001 New Vision Policy and the various Malaysia Development Plans, the education system is used more as a political tool rather than a means of correcting social inequality and promoting social unity among the Malaysian populace.

Following the Independence in 1957 and the 1969 Racial Riots, the Malaysian government introduced various educational strategies such as special schools, scholarships, ethnic quotas through a highly sponsored education system for the *Bumiputeras*. These measures were aimed at correcting the social inequalities that were the product of British colonialism. It is ironical that these measures of national unity are now the discord of national disunity and contemporary ethnic politics on some levels.

The educational system advocates for an ideology of meritocracy but this is located within the discourse of ethnic politics. There are contradictions here as not all students have equal opportunities and access to educational resources and pathways. As seen in the discussions, different types of schools provide different pathways to students from different ethnic groups. These different schools have resulted in educational differences that are located along social and economic hierarchies. The affirmative action policy, while important and justified when introduced to rectify social inequalities along ethnic lines can no longer play an important role in promoting national unity and identity. Contemporary Malaysia

is divided along both ethnic and class lines – and education can be used as an important social tool in addressing these inequalities.

The Chinese ethnic schools are thriving with the economic and cultural backing of the Chinese community. These schools are seen as a great success story both in relation to the Chinese ethnic community and nationally as well. The Tamil ethnic schools are an example of an ethnic education that is a social and educational handicap to the Indian ethnic minority group. The social and political marginalization of the Indian community does not help in the deplorable state of these schools. The *Orang Asli* continues to be disadvantaged on many levels within the education system. There are also marginalized groups such as the non-Malay groups of *Bumiputeras* and the non-citizen migrant workers that are disadvantaged. As discussed earlier, *Bumiputeras are the Malays and other indigenous peoples. Eighty percent of the Bumiputeras are Malays and the Malays are the dominant ethnic and political group in Malaysia. Given this socio-cultural context, the category of Bumiputera tends to refer to the Malays*, The residential science schools and MARA junior science colleges not only create an ethnic divide but also an intra-ethnic divide as the Malays who benefit from these well-resourced and funded schools are generally not the Malay poor. Students in these different schools do not have equal opportunities in the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for social and economic mobility within the Malaysian society. There are also inequalities in terms of physical infrastructures and resources in these different schools. These social injustices within the current education and schooling system are further exacerbated at the tertiary education levels. There are also intra ethnic as well as inter ethnic differences to be considered in these debates.

Malaysia has to ensure that the education system maximizes the creative and educational potential of each child and citizen to the fullest. To do so, issues to do with social, economic and educational inequalities between and within the ethnic groups have to be addressed urgently. The Government has to look hard at the structural and resource inequalities between the different types of schools. Issues related to school infrastructure and facilities, teacher professionalism and funding have to be considered. The different future educational opportunities and pathways for students from these different schools have also to be examined. The suitability of the curriculum and national examinations has also to be analysed. Do the present system privilege some students and marginalizes other students? The education system has to move beyond a policy of ethnic exclusivism which promotes segregation rather than integration.

The NEP and related educational policies and practices have resulted in the emergence of the middle-class Malay professionals and Malay business elite. The Chinese have also benefited from the economic symbiosis through their business ventures with these groups of Malays. Furthermore, with deregulation and privatization together with the economic boom in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both the Chinese and elite Malays have benefited economically and socially further strengthening their economic and political positionings.

The education system has to move forward with good and transparent governance with accountability through a reliable surveillance mechanism. While there

has to be some competitive rigor and element of meritocracy within the system, an affirmative action policy based on income and poverty levels rather than the *Bumiputera*-non-*Bumiputera* binary will ensure that marginalized Malaysians have access to educational opportunities and pathways. There also has to be an emphasis on critical educational research that examines issues to do with social, economic and educational inequalities between and within the ethnic groups. There has to be some move from Malaysian educational research being constructed as an organized, political, and state directed academic activity to an academic and social activity that is driven by the needs of the different social and ethnic groups, as well as the global and nationalistic agendas of the nation. Such research will be highly beneficial for the nation in future educational reforms.

There also has to be more spaces for public and academic debates on social inclusions and exclusions in relation to education. There has been an increase of such debates within non-mainstream media such as *MalaysiaKini* and *Aliran*. For example, recent debates on the effectiveness of the affirmative action policies in Malaysia in addressing wider social and economic inequalities between and within the ethnic groups. Questions as to whether these policies have produced groups of Malays who are complacent and lack competition have also been raised in recent public discourses have also been raised in these debates.

The legacy of Malaysia's rich cultural and ethnic mix is reflected in these different types of schools in Malaysia. These cultural differences are also located within discourses of colonialism, nationalism, ethnic politics and globalization. Writers in the critical tradition of education have argued that education and schooling systems are vibrantly located within the production of social hierarchies (Apple, 2003; Giroux, 2001). Education and schooling in the Malaysian context continue to be sites of political and cultural contestations. These unequal relations of power and marginalization between these different types of schools cannot be ignored in order for Malaysia to position herself as a leading international exemplar for education of a culturally diverse nation. The Malaysian government and other stake-holders have to address notions of equity, fairness and democracy in the education system into order to take this multiethnic nation forward in the global arena.

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