Chapter 16
The Predicament of Racial Harmony and National Unity in Malaysia: Evidence Accrued from Schools and Classroom Practices

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Abstract This paper examines the education policies and reform initiatives that were put in place historically and their contribution towards race and ethnic relations in Malaysia. The analysis reveals that they did serve well for the broader scheme of socio-economic development but undermined the purpose of integration and harmony among the various racial and ethnic groups. An obvious flaw or oversight of these early policy initiatives appears to be the failure to incorporate policies of multicultural education which, apparently, were foreshadowing the emerging divisive nature of Malaysian society. Before the present situation becomes irretrievable and causes greater harm, the government needs to review its stance and to expose, educate and nurture its citizens as to the nature of multiculturalism, its values and beliefs. The best place to begin would, of course, be in the schools.

Keywords Education policy • Racial integration • Multicultural education • Classroom practice • Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country both demographically and constitutionally. This is a reality that will remain, despite any future turn of events, political or social; it is a legacy that the country inherited as a result of about two

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centuries of British colonial rule. However, it ought to be noted that foreign immigration to this part of the world had already commenced much earlier than the imperial era; it took place in random and isolated occurrences as a result of trade ventures from the Arabian Peninsula, India and China. It was, however, the British who encouraged large numbers of Chinese and Indians to leave their native countries to support and sustain the economic exploitation of the region. Thus in 1957, when independence was declared, it was at first for Malaya, now known as Peninsular Malaysia. At that time, the demographic composition was 50% Malays, 37% Chinese and 11% Indians (Abdul Rahim 2002). Then, in 1963, Malaya incorporated with Singapore and the island nations of Borneo, namely, Sabah and Sarawak, to form the confederation of Malaysia in order to consolidate the viability of their nationhood. This brought about a new demographic structure. Along with already fundamentally diverse population of Malaya, the peoples of the coalition countries added both to its numbers and ethnic multiplicity. The Malaysian census of 1964 revealed a population of 9.3 million with 52.5% Malays, 36.7% Chinese, 9.6% Indians and 2.2% others (Thomas 2007). The process of nation-building had therefore to contend with the various groups' determination to retain their own language, religion, cultural context, economic orientation, social beliefs and values, and 2 years after the formation of Malaysia, Singapore withdrawing from the arrangement for political and ideological reasons.

Today, the Malaysian population has grown to about 28.3 million: Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, who are collectively called *Bumiputra* or "sons of the soil", constitute 66.8%, while the Chinese and Indians in the category of immigrant citizens make up 24.5% and 7.4%, respectively; another 1.3% can be attributed to the others (Statistics Department Malaysia 2009). Also noteworthy is the inherent ethnic mix of the population in terms of religious adherence. According to the 2000 census, Muslims constituted 60.4% of the population. Of the other forms, Buddhism contributed 19.2%, Christian 9.1%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions 2.6%, with 1.5% either classified as other or unknown and 0.8% registering as having none. It may also be noted that all Malays are statutorily Muslims. However, in practice, it is the above racial and religious categorization that historically has heavily influenced the politics and policy-making processes of the country.

Upon attaining independence, the single most important goal for the newly formed country was building its nationalistic foundations, which in the case of Malaysia began with the desegregation and unification of the various multiple racial and ethnic groups. The government undertook a number of fundamental reforms to bring the various groups together beginning with education and the school system. This chapter examines the post-independent history of the government's management of the educational processes in parallel with the evolution of a multicultural society: what were the policies and challenges; what kind of inducements and interventions were offered in pursuit of greater social cohesion and integration; what appears to be the current position; and what might be in store for the country in the foreseeable future as a united multiracial and multicultural state. The stated investi-

gation was undertaken in view of numerous adverse reports and differences in public opinion about the present state of race and ethnic relations in the country. The electronic media has also been prolific in this debate with contributors expressing extreme, acrimonious viewpoints that suggest all is not well demographically in the country.

The Historical Context

History has it that the British precluded offering independence to Malaya and, subsequently, the formation of Malaysia without an assurance of unity and harmony among the various ethnic groups as a precondition (Thomas 2007). In practice, the peoples of the land had long lived in a segregated environment culturally and institutionally, each taking care of its own communal interests because of the British unscrupulous "divide and rule" policy in pursuit of economic gains (Drakakis-Smith 1992), and the three major races, including all the inherent ethnic groups, had to be brought together to raise a common front for independence. The founding fathers who were the leaders of the various racial groups thus convened an alliance which in due course issued a memorandum called the "Social Contract" that was duly enshrined in the Federal constitution. Although the drafting of the Social Contract commenced prior to the independence of Malaya, its principles were also formally adopted as the "Malaysia Agreement" to encompass the governance of Malaysia as well. The nature and essence of the Social Contract were captured well in a paper presented at the 14th Malaysian Law Conference by Thomas (2007, p.27):

> Thus, the Social Contract, social compact or bargain reached by the 3 communities under the watchful eye of the British imperial power prior to Merdeka (Independence) was in essence that in exchange for a place under the Malayan sun with full citizenship, a right to use their language and observe their religion, the non-Malays had to concede special privileges to the Malays to assist the latter to ascend the economic ladder. It was a quid pro quo. In this equilibrium, the non-Malays were not to be relegated to second class citizens: citizenship was not on a 2-tier basis and there was going to be no apartheid, partition or repatriation. What was required from the non-Malays at the time of Merdeka was undivided loyalty to the new nation. Racial differences were recognized. Diversity was encouraged. There was no pressure to integrate into one Malayan race. Assimilation was out of the question. Thus, a united Malayan nation did not involve the sacrifice by any community of its culture or customs. Malaya was always to remain a plural society.

Explicitly, the Social Contract and, subsequently, the Federal constitution laid the foundation for a multiculturalism that is not assimilative but accommodative; this multiculturalism based on the Social Contract would determine the character of nation-building for Malaysia. Accordingly, the governance of the country would have to proceed on the basis of the stated principles of the contract towards national unity and racial harmony. This policy, it would appear, did operate for the decade after independence mainly by revamping the education system.

Education Ordinance and Act

The first phase of reconstruction of the colonial educational system into a Malaysian education organization commenced with the 1956 Razak Report that became the first education ordinance for independent Malaya (Report of the Education Committee 1956). Essentially, the ordinance called for structural changes at the primary school level. This was generally recognized as a necessary first step in the attempt to unify the various ethnic communities, since primary education was more developed and the resulting hope for improvements could forecast the nature of future needed changes in the secondary sector. The idea of a National Education System was thus mooted that would sponsor two types of public schools; Standard National Schools and Standard-type National Schools; the former would have Malay as the medium of instruction and the latter English, Chinese or Tamil. With regard to additional schools, the Malay medium schools were to be built as a strategic requirement, whereas the Chinese and Tamil schools were to be made available on a needs-based demand (either when there were at least 15 students in a class or the parents made a special request for it). The secondary schools were also to be similarly differentiated, but the Standard type would constitute only the English schools; in other words, the Chinese and Tamil schools would not exist beyond the primary level. However, despite the ruling on the fate of the vernacular schools, the Chinese community continued to maintain their high schools. Currently, Mandarin education as an independent entity takes place at 60 sites across the country. Malay and English had to be taught appropriately as compulsory subjects in all the primary and secondary schools. The ordinance also stated that all the national (government) schools were to be given financial aid.

A three-year review of the implementation of the 1956 Razak Report resulted in the Rahman Talib Report in 1960 and served as the basis for the Education Act of 1961. Fundamentally, it advocated the continued implementation of the previous report but at the same time drew up a mechanism for moving children from the different types of primary schools into the standard secondary schools. Besides, it also focused attention on schooling for rural children and the need for vocational schools for those who could not continue academically. The Rahman Talib Report also indicated that the national and national-type (changed from Standard National and Standard-type National) schools would offer free education for all children and would be linked by means of a common curriculum and examination. Henceforth, Malay was to be the national language and, therefore, immediately became the mandatory medium of instruction in all the primary schools and eventually in all the secondary ones. Ironically, tangential to the terms of the Social Contract, the report expressed interest in doing away with the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools, but this suggestion was rebuffed by the non-Malays who argued that it would undermine their cultural existence and language. The non-Malays were also unhappy with a compensatory gesture that the vernacular languages would be taught as separate subjects when at least 15 students were available for a class.

Then, there were the Hussein Onn Report and Mahathir Report that came out in 1971 and 1979, respectively. Both reports claimed to continue to aim for national

unity, an idea that had to be coupled with the other developmental needs of the country. The reports recommended certain decisive actions. The Hussein Onn report put a closure to the debate on continuing the English medium schools. It stated, "Beginning 1968, the Malay language will progressively replace the English language as the medium of instruction in all English-medium schools". However, it wanted to retain English as a second language because of its worldwide usage and the expansion in its use in various fields. Building on the key aspects of the 1971 report, the Mahathir Report, in particular, emphasized that education also needed to address the manpower needs of the country and focus on science and technology and the development of noble values and discipline among children. It proposed a new coordinated curriculum for primary and secondary education in 1983 and 1989, respectively. However, niether report contained any significant discussion on the continuing maintenance of the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools or the possibility of abolishing them.

Unlike the past ordinances, the 1996 Education Act, it is claimed, came into force with no input from the public. Nevertheless, it appeared to adopt a broader holistic approach in its coverage than its predecessors. An important aspect of the Act was that its authors embraced ideas of multiculturalism while retaining many of the recommendations of the 1961 Act and reports of 1971 and 1979 that had had a major impact on the evolution of the Malaysian education system. However, critics denounced it on the grounds that it lacked explicit recommendations for its claims (Segawa 2007). The strength of the 1996 Act was perceived to be the emphasis it placed on the needs of the country's fast-paced economic and social growth, especially in higher education where more liberal policies were adopted with regard to private education, science, technology, ICT and the medium of instruction. Where schools were concerned, it supported the continuance of the vernacular schools, thus attempting to allay the fear among the non-Malays that their abolition was an implicit part of the policy-maker's agenda. On the other hand, the Act recognized and reinforced their right to exist with an open-ended commitment of government support and the necessary financial aid to set up and maintain them. It proposed that religious subjects could also be taught in the schools but only to those who actually professed the particular form. And, in the national schools, facilities were to be made available to teach the students' mother tongue provided at least 15 individuals were available to make up a class. The preschools or kindergartens were also allowed to be run in the pupils' own language provided they also made learning the national language compulsory and complied with a national curriculum.

Perspectives of Multiculturalism in Education

Multicultural education has been defined as a structured process designed to foster understanding, acceptance and constructive relations among students (Banks 2003; Banks and Banks 2010a, b). It should provide opportunities for students to see people of different background and culture as a source of learning and to recognize

and respect diversity as an inherent characteristic of human life. Multicultural education should be able to help students understand their own culture and at the same time understand that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another. It should be able to elevate a student from the state of ethnocentrism to multiculturalism, whereby through different stages of understanding, accepting, respecting and appreciating they move from the view that their own culture and tradition are the best in the world to finally affirming other people's cultures and practices (Babtiste 2002; Komives et al. 1998; Nieto 2002). According to Banks and Banks (2010a, b), the ethnocentrism to multiculturalism growth process cannot be accomplished through sporadic add-on interventions that might be introduced situationally; instead, it had to be approached holistically through an integrated curriculum and relevant pedagogical practices which organize basic multicultural concepts around the contributions and perspectives of different groups and cultures (Gay 2000; Powell 2001).

It has been suggested that a comprehensive implementation of multicultural education would have to focus on five key areas (Banks and Banks 2010a, b): (a) *content integration* where teachers used examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations and theories in a particular subject area or discipline; (b) *knowledge construction*, whereby the teachers helped students understand, investigate and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases within a discipline influenced the ways knowledge was created; (c) *practice of equity* pedagogy that allowed teachers to modify their teaching so as to facilitate the academic achievements of students from diverse racial, cultural and social class groups; (d) *prejudice reduction* that focused on the students' racial attitudes and how they could be modified by the teaching methods and materials; and (e) creation of an *empowering school culture* and structure that enabled the full participation of all students from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups.

Multicultural education when designed and executed effectively can, it has been argued, pave the way for self-expression, open dialogue, critical thinking and analysis of alternative viewpoints among students (Sleeter and Grant 2003). Multicultural education that emphasizes learning about the history, traditions and cultural practices of one's own culture and that of others can also assist students in feeling comfortable to communicate amicably with members of multiple cultures, thus overcoming feelings of alienation and isolation.

Critical Turning Point

In 1969, Malaysia, especially the peninsular area, witnessed a postelection racial riot known historically as the May 13 Incident. The Malays and Chinese engaged in a violent confrontation that affected the total population. The government's analysis of the incident was that it was triggered by the socio-economic imbalance that existed among the racial and ethnic groups. According to Abdul Rahim (2002), the

educational policy and developmental plan of the colonial rulers led to a disparity of educational opportunities between and within the major ethnic groups and also emphasized the social and economic inequalities between the Malays and non-Malays. It was estimated that the Malays owned only 1.5% of the nation's corporate stock ownership, while the non-Malays and foreigners owned much higher percentages (Jomo 2004). Until the riot erupted, the lurking racial grievances and tensions and their detrimental impact on national unity were never suspected. Thus, in 1970, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) and, subsequently, the Malay Affirmative Action plan to address the socio-economic disparity among the people (Jomo 2004; Lim et al. 2009).

Through the NEP the government aimed at reducing poverty levels in the country from 49% in the 1960s to 16% by 1990, with a distributed ratio of the national wealth at 30:40:30 percent among the Malays, non-Malays and foreigners, respectively. This implied that the growth ratio for the Malays as compared to the non-Malays would have to be huge and had to be achieved in just two decades. The government was also convinced that the Malays on their own were not going to make the socio-economic transformation as envisioned by NEP because of their relatively backward position compared to the non-Malays especially the Chinese who were commercially well ahead. If the identification of economic activities and status by race were to be eliminated, the government had to offer a helping hand to the Malays (Mohamad 2009; Watson 1980a, b).

Educationally, the government tolerated a great deal of latitude in the provision of direct benefits for the Malays. Apart from the educational reforms already in place that were coincidently advantageous to the Malay students, namely, the national school policy, national language policy and expansion of school facilities to rural areas, the government established the matriculation stream as an alternative to the higher secondary school education to facilitate Malay students' access to university education. The government also set up a number of residential schools to provide focused training and tutoring for the matriculation students. Also, during the first stipulated period of the NEP, the Malaysian Technology University and Mara Institute of Technology, which in 1999 was given full-fledged university status, were created from extant technical institutions that gave preferential admission to Malay students to train and qualify them in a number of professional and semi-professional and technological disciplines. Additionally, Malay students were granted government scholarships extensively to go overseas for further education.

Conflicts and Contentions

An examination of literature produced both by local and international authors on the state of racial and ethnic relations in the country exposed a number of deeply embedded discriminatory views and beliefs among the Malaysian population (Abdullah et al. 2012; Gudeman 2002; Jamil and Raman 2012; Mohd Yousuf 2008; Noor 2007; Pong 1999; Puteh 2011; Saad 2012; Segawa 2007; Wan Husin 2011).

Not all of these views were explicitly expressed, as many were put forth as reasons and justifications for the positions taken by different people; at times, they were presented merely as disagreements of one form or another to rebut an ongoing debate. These authors were engaged in the contextual analysis and discussion of fundamental issues relating to nation-building, integration, national unity, racial harmony, social cohesion and polarization; a few also looked into the empirical aspect of typical social practices and norms in the wider environment beyond schooling. Interestingly, many scholars sought to maintain objectivity in their analysis, while others were inclined towards either end of the Malay and non-Malay spectrum.

Discussions by these authors of educational matters mainly concerned the issues of vernacular schools, curriculum, preferential treatment, and intercultural sensitivities.

Vernacular Schools

The non-Malays regarded the vernacular schools as a lifeline to perpetuate their native identity, culture and language. Although they do not enjoy the same status as the nationally accredited schools, they have survived all through the years of independence and number to date about 523 for the Indians and 1294 for the Chinese out of a total of 7723 institutions (Ministry of Education 2012). One of the complaints of the non-Malays is that their schools do not get the same level of government support and funding as do the Malay national schools. A nominal budget allocation would be 1% for the Indian schools, 2.5% for the Chinese schools and 96.5% for the Malay schools. Moreover, the vernacular schools have suffered grave shortages of qualified teachers, and there has been no effort on the part of the government to address the issue. Non-Malays have continued to harbour suspicions that the government intention was to abolish the vernacular schools and have therefore been extremely sensitive to possible threats to these establishments in any policy overtures.

However, those opposed to vernacular schools have argued that they were a hindrance to national unity. These opponents contended such schools deprived children from different ethnic background opportunities to sit at the same table to eat, chat and befriend each other, thus structurally causing polarization. Supporters rejected this point of view citing evidence that the conditions of polarization already existed in many national schools where there were mixed student populations. The latter argued that polarization was mainly the result of lopsided policy practices.

Another issue that frequently surfaced in the debate on vernacular schools was that the Chinese secondary schools operated as private institutions outside the realm of the National Education Policy. According to the policy makers and also advocates of pro-Malay medium of instruction, these vernacular secondary schools thereby contributed to polarization or alienation of the Chinese students from the children of other races. But the supporters of these Chinese institutions contended

that they were needed to perpetuate the group's cultural identify and language and at the same time safeguard the opportunities of their students to procure tertiary education places and thus ensure future employment prospects.

Curriculum

From the perspective of the minority groups, the Education Act, 1996, which reiterated the need to adopt a multicultural approach and to incorporate multicultural elements within the taught subject matter, did not bring about any substantial change on the ground or in the national curriculum. Critics argued that initiatives such as the "1-Malaysia" policy that the then Prime Minister propagated did not truly allow for meaningful student interaction across ethnic groups. They suggested that the institutional environment and necessary supportive requirements were not sufficiently well established in the schools and classrooms to do more than encourage tolerance and thus failed to promote real understanding about the multicultural nature of the national population. Moreover, there were still laws that prohibited open discussion on issues of ethnicity, language, religion and culture that constrained meaningful interaction among the students.

Preferential Treatment

A recurring discussion point in the debate on race and ethnic relations in the country concerned the position of the residential schools and the matriculation system for entering local universities, which fast tracked Malay students and thereby accorded them preferential treatment. These institutions were established to elevate the education level and employment opportunities of the Malay students, and they enjoyed the provision of abundant government sponsorship and facilitation. The teaching and administrative staff, occasionally coming from across the ethnic groups, were especially selected with regard to the various subjects and functions. Although, in principle, 10% of the student capacity was allocated to non-Malays, these places were not usually taken up because of the need to relocate away from families and to cope with cultural constraints of a Malay-dominant environment.

The award of government scholarships to pursue higher education overseas, and, more recently, in the local universities, has proved to be a policy favouring the Malay students. The award of scholarships is based on racial proportion, a practice the non-Malays argue does not correlate with the actual performance of students. In practice, the question of merit-based competition therefore exists only within and not between ethnic groups, thus resulting in many of the non-Malay students with outstanding examination results being deprived of the necessary fiscal support to further their education in pursuit of long cherished dreams.

Intercultural Sensitivities

There is a view that the regional culture and language (referring, in particular, to the Southeast Asian countries with an ethnic Malay majority) should serve as the basis for determining the design of a national culture and identity even if this favoured the assimilationist model. But non-Malays with their historically established traditions are firmly against losing their natural identities. They argue that policies of integration and social cohesion should not coerce the minorities to abdicate those intrinsic characteristics that make and differentiate them as a community. This bifurcated view of a national culture and identity seems to have resulted in members on either side of the racial spectrum becoming immune to one another's inherent sensitivities, as evidenced by the derogatory remarks, racial slurs and discriminatory acts which occur from time to time.

A search of the local media online revealed that racial discrimination and derogatory remarks by teachers, headmasters and school principals were a regular occurrences that remained unchecked by the authorities; unchecked because no system or concerted effort on the part of the government seemed to be available to monitor and counter them. When issues surfaced, the interventions by the authorities seemed designed to quell the "public noise" rather than to investigate the truth and root cause of such incidents and showcase them as deterrents to others.

Case of the Vision Schools

In 1995, the government introduced the policy of Vision Schools to combat the rising trend in racial polarization among students both in schools and in higher education (Ministry of Education 1995). The idea was to arrest the problem at the source which the government considered lay in the vernacular schools. Accordingly, the Vision Schools would house all three – Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – medium schools within the same compound or school campus, but each would manage its own affairs independently and be autonomous as in the past. Each school would have its own head teacher, teachers and students and staff and maintain the medium of instruction in their respective native language; they would also teach Malay, the national language, as a compulsory subject. However, they would share common facilities and amenities such as the canteen, playgrounds and multipurpose hall and organize school events and celebrations jointly such as various sporting occasions, the National Day and public holidays. At the same time, they would encourage their students to take part in the cultural festivals of the different groups.

The aim of the Vision Schools was to create the proximity, space and opportunity for the students to come together, mingle and befriend one another and possibly be exposed to one another's way of life and conduct. At the beginning, the Vision School policy seemed a positive move by the government. In the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1995–2000), it was stated that seven Vision Schools would be established

throughout the country as pilot projects and that this number was to be increased to 13 in later years, either by relocating existing schools or constructing new ones (Education in Malaysia 2001). However, as of 2009, only six schools were operational, and the number has not increased since then. Among the six, only one school has attempted to implement the policy aims fully with the participation of all three vernacular schools in the National Malay Day and the National-type Chinese and the National-type Tamil events. The other five institutions housed only the Malay and Tamil schools because the Chinese schools chosen to participate refused to go along with the policy, because they suspected a hidden agenda designed to affect their cultural identity and language.

An intensive case study of the Vision Schools in Malaysia (Malakolunthu 2009; Malakolunthu and Rengasamy 2013), including the fully participating schools in two different states, revealed that the policy was only a partial success in terms of its formulation, preparation and implementation. There was no actual policy document available except for a working paper circulated to selected people such as the school heads. This merely consisted of an introductory note explaining what the policy was all about. In comparative terms, there was no fundamental difference in the functioning of the Vision and regular schools. In each case, the curriculum was the same; the textbooks and assessment and examinations were the same; and the pedagogy remained unaltered and consisted mainly of teacher-led instruction. School heads and teachers did on occasion engage in a conversation about the Vision School policy and its intended purpose, and overall they were appreciative of the idea but were uncertain about the role they were supposed to play to make it work. They were also worried about the long-standing taboo that discouraged them from taking up racially sensitive issues during their teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

The scenario that emerges from the investigation of the different sources of information on educational policies and practices in schools as well as race and ethnic relations in Malaysia over the years of independence has revealed that the original governmental efforts towards creating social cohesion and integration amidst its multiracial and multi-ethnic population had stalled along the way. The founding fathers, as was explicit in the "Social Contract" and "Malaysia Agreement", clearly spelt out their vision for the form and character of the evolving Malaysian society that they wished to establish, and the educational reforms that were set in place at the time of independence were deemed exactly right to realize these goals. The Malayanization (subsequently the Malaysianization) education reforms which involved restructuring of the school system, creating a standardized curriculum, introducing a national language and making education mandatory, free and available for all children, all contributed to Malaysianization. The continued existence of vernacular schools was not viewed as an obstacle but, instead, paved the way for a centralized secondary education system by introducing an intermediate preparatory

year for students of national-type or vernacular schools. In later years these schools accepted the switch to the Malay national language as the medium of instruction.

A critical analysis of the evolution and growth of the education system, especially when viewed from the concerns of racial polarization among students and the reported incidences of racial discrimination and derogatory acts on ethnic minority groups in both primary and secondary schools, suggests that the policy makers and educational leaders, when laying down the foundations of the system, lacked the necessary foresight by failing to incorporate the principles of multicultural education. Although not explicitly stated, the need for such principles was strongly implied in the statutory documents produced by the nation's founding forefathers. Besides, the nation's demography, recognized explicitly within the constitution, should have prompted the authorities to adopt the principles of multicultural education in developing the Malaysian education system. Such policy directives would, according to Banks (2003), have helped to foster understanding, acceptance and constructive relations among the students of various backgrounds. However it would seem that such a policy orientation was never contemplated and the reasons for this omission remain unexplained, even today.

In the absence of a multicultural education approach, the early educational reforms appear to have been only physical, structural, purely academic and linguistic. In other words, the ethnocentric nature of the various groups of people remained unnurtured, and consequently little was done to promote the ideas of multiculturalism or to strengthen its practice. The "self-expression, open dialogue, critical thinking and analysis of alternative viewpoints" Sleeter and Grant (2003) perceived as essential for multicultural learning certainly did not exist in the school curriculum. Except for the claims of extraordinary friendship bonding among certain individuals of different races that were reported in the media and literature as typical of school days during the 1960s and 1970s, the generally interactive interracial and interethnic relationships of the time were most probably circumstantial and superficial. Moreover, no authentic reports or studies were available from that period to evaluate the extent to which polarization did or did not exist.

In the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, the policies that ensued, namely, the New Economic Policy and the Malay Affirmative Action, wittingly or otherwise, abandoned the founding fathers' vision of a united Malaysian multicultural society. Subsequently these policies have produced race-based politics and ideologies which over the years have increasingly dominated and become a new reality for the governance of the country. Thus, instead of desegregation, segregation has indeed been embedded into the existing structures. However, it may also be true to say that Malaysian society has never reached a point of integration throughout its history. Each racial and ethnic group has continued to remain reluctant to become involved with other sections of society in the attempt to safeguard and maximize its communal interests. Coupled with this, the socio-economic disparities, and the different amounts of cultural capital available to support entrepreneurship within the various ethnic groups, have created a highly competitive environment in which each group seeks to outdo the other. Starting from a lower base, the Malays have required

greater governmental support to lift them from poverty and help them overcome the limitations of an agrarian background, so that they could compete on equal terms. The other ethnic minorities have resented this favoured treatment and have argued that these "help" initiatives have been carried to excessive levels and advantaged special interest groups. The cumulative effect of all these policy initiatives has therefore been to reinforce the indisputable divide between the Malays and non-Malays, as evidenced by the opposing sets of mental models and perspectives harboured generally by the two respective groups.

An interesting result emerges from the above analysis. It would seem that the leaders of the various races and ethnicities opted at the time to ignore the consequences of not reinforcing the role of education in building social cohesion and national unity. Instead, their activities and initiatives contributed to distancing the different student groups from one another physically and emotionally and further exaggerated their differences. The result of this separation was the creation of a trouble free environment where the different races and ethnicities could live in close proximity, but without stepping on each other's toes. Recently, the government has rolled out a new comprehensive Education Transformation Programme popularly known as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025. This aims to achieve a standard of education that is on par with the best in the world in terms of access, quality, equity, unity and national identity (Ministry of Education 2013). While addressing many pertinent school improvement, teaching and learning and logistic issues, the policy makers seem to be non-cognizant of the seriousness of the race and ethnic relations in the country and hence are silent on specific plans to address it. In this Education Blueprint the dramatic growth of the vernacular schools and the resultant homogenization of the education system by ethnicity were cited as the main reasons why students were deprived of the opportunity to experience racial diversity. Statistics revealed that only 10% of non-Malay students associate with 90% of Malay students in the National Schools. In response to these statistics, the Blueprint expressed support for add-on programmes such as the Student Integration Plan for Unity rather than advocating an integral approach to prepare the students for a multicultural world. In conclusion, Malaysians are indeed caught in a vicious circle that will have to be broken in order to tackle the lurking trauma of an unhealthy race and ethnic relationship in the country. As it is, it remains to be seen whether Malaysia can ever become united enough to evolve into the developed nation that it aspires to become by 2020.

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