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[Malaysia] Early Education and Development in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges in Providing a Framework for a Multiethnic Society

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Malaysia: A Multiethnic Country

Malaysia is an ethnically heterogeneous Southeast Asian country. The majority ethnic groups are Malay and indigenous tribes known as *Bumiputera*; together, these groups comprise approximately 61% of 29 million of total population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010). The largest minority groups are Chinese with 24 % of population, and Indians and other minorities who make up about 15% (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010). Historically, the *Bumiputera* have played a major role in politics and government policies, whereas the Chinese have been dominant in the business and commerce community concentrated in urban areas. The Indians are mostly descendants of small traders brought by British during colonial years to work in the rubber plantations and actively involved in business after the country gained independence.

Early Education and Care

The term "early education" refers to education for children from birth to age six which is funded and delivered by several government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but is not part of the formal education system and not compulsory (Ministry of Education, 2005). Government-run non-profit early education programs, generally located in rural areas, emphasize socio-emotional development and focus less on academic achievement, whereas non-governmental for-profit preschools are usually established in urban areas, and heavily emphasize the academic aspect (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2000). Public early education programs are free to parents and fully funded by the government, but private early education programs charges fees and their administrators are free to choose the curriculum and medium of instruction to be used in their establishments (Majzub, 2003). Although guidelines from the Ministry of Education serve as the base for curriculum for children 4-6 years of age, there is no specific curriculum guideline for children under the age of four.

In Malaysia, there are two types of early education: nursery and preschool. Table 1 shows the most common types of early care and education category.

Table 1. Type of Early Care and Education Centers in Malaysia

	Nursery	Preschool
Age	Birth to 4 years old	5 to 6 years old
Type of Center	Home-based Serving fewer than 10 children	Center-based Serving 10 or more children
Teacher-child Ratio	1:10	1:25
Percentage of the Center in the Country	38%	62%

Source: Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2005.

The public and private centers are very different in their goals and how they run their programs and centers in many aspects such as on teaching and learning, teacher preparation and qualifications, teacher-child ratio, rules and regulations, and parental beliefs and expectations. Table 2 illustrates these differences.

Table 2. Comparison between Public and Private Preschool

	Public Center	Private Center
Curriculum Emphasized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize social and emotional development • Lack defined goals and objectives • Integrate Islamic teaching and values • Language of instruction: Malay • Funded by government and non-profit organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize cognitive development • The program promotes balanced program to promote whole child concept of cognitive, social and emotional development • Language of instruction: English, Mandarin, and Tamil • Enrichment programs (ballet, martial arts, drama, modern dance and art) • Run by private, for-profit organizations emphasize social and emotional development
Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-centered • Drill technique • Limited learning materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child-centered • Classroom conducive for learning • Appropriate learning materials
Teacher-Child Ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:28 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:15
Percentage of Early Education Center in the Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 57.3% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42.7%
Teacher Qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally trained and less qualified • Lack professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained abroad • Highly qualified
Rules and Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many centers are not licensed • Less regulated • Lack safety measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensed by the Ministry of Education • Established rules for safety and zoning
Parental Beliefs and Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are mostly <i>Bumiputera</i> • Parents believe children should learn what they need to know to meet the needs of Malaysian society • Parents believe children should learn social skills to be competent in everyday life when they go to primary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are mostly Chinese and Indians • Parents believe private centers are better than public centers • Children should receive education in the real world and be competitive academically • Parents hope their children would be eligible for programs for the gifted

Pictures below show some of the differences in the private and public preschools' activities and classroom environments.



A teacher in a private preschool explains "Yakult Day" using a slide show. Yakult day is the day the children visit factory manufactured cultured milk called yakult. Before the trip the children watch the show and the teacher explains about the health benefits of drinking the yakult.



A classroom in a private preschool equipped with modern technology and an appropriate classroom environment.



Public preschool building in a rural area



Morning opening session in a public preschool



Children at reading center during free time in a public preschool

Pictures above show private and public preschool differences in teacher and children learning activities, the quality of the learning materials and classroom environment.

The Impact of a Multiethnic Society on Early Education and Care

In Malaysia, ethnic composition is one of the forces that influence and shape politics, economics, educational policies and environment. The politics of ethnic identification among the three major ethnic groups (*Bumiputera* including Malay, Chinese, and Indians) have resulted in power imbalances and hierarchies along with the various social, educational, and economic dimensions. Inequalities exist between different ethnic groups. Although Chinese make up only one-third of the population, they account for 70% of the country's market capitalization. *Bumiputeras* play major roles in politics and government, but the majority of them live in rural areas with poor living conditions and far lower average income and wealth than the Chinese and Indian.

The government tried to solve this issue by launching the so-called New Economic Policy in 1990 to improve *Bumiputeras'* overall economic and educational status. However, members of the minority ethnic groups and opponent political parties considered this policy as a positive discrimination that favored *Bumiputera* over other races (Kuppusamy, 2006) and as a result it generated greater interethnic resentment (Jomo, 2004). These power dynamics have in turn produced the Malaysian education and schooling system that is highly politicized and ethnicized.

Schools vary in terms of government funding, ethnic community support, resources and future educational opportunities. They are also used strategically by the government and the ethnic collectives in the social and political positioning of these ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia.

Interethnic resentment is also a result of the impact of colonialism. Historical ties with Britain and the British educational tradition instilled an elitist ideology that has a great impact on minority parents and children in urban areas (Muthu, 2007). The parents enroll their children in English-language schools which are more established than schools with other language of instruction. They believed that English language schools are better than other schools. These give more advantages for their children to gain knowledge. The effects of colonialism can also be seen in teacher recruitment and qualification (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2005). Many teachers in private urban preschools graduated from program overseas, especially in England and other European countries. These centers ground their teaching and learning philosophy in European traditions which in many ways may conflict with national education philosophy that emphasized on the balance between intellectual and spiritual values and beliefs of Eastern culture (Giacchino-Baker, 2010).

An Early Education Framework for a Multiethnic Society

Ethnic tension along with economic and politic realities and cultural differences indirectly affects educational progress. The contradictions and tension between state ideology and ethnic minority stances on education are rooted in the tension between hegemony and the multi-cultural nature of Malaysian society (Jamil, 2010). However, the challenge comes when the education becomes an ethnic and political issue.

Early education in Malaysia has expanded significantly over the past 20 years and focuses currently on efforts to establish a world-class educational system to equip children with the skills that they will need to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The government had developed programs and initiatives to resolve educational issues related to the inter-ethnic crisis. For example, through Vision 2020, the Malaysian government mandated the Education Act of 1996, which requires that all teachers must be qualified to teach young children, establishes a national preschool curriculum in all preschools, and seeks to increase enrollment in early education centers. Vision 2020 stresses development in terms of national unity and social cohesion, economy, social justice, political comprehensive and rounded agenda for the nation to narrow the gap between ethnicities. This is especially critical for *Bumiputera* who is the majority of the ethnic but only owns less than 30% of wealth. Providing a national education is one of the means by which redistribution of wealth across the ethnic groups is to be fulfilled. The programs in the Vision 2020 hopefully will provide *Bumiputera* children a head start to the quality early education to compete with Chinese and Indians who have already far ahead in the race.

Under the Child Care Act, the Department of Social Welfare is providing intervention programs for young children through Child and Maternal Clinics. These services provide educational assistance to the children from low income families to better prepare their children with skills they need to improve educational attainment and to promote quality life. In this respect, educational equality can be one of the ways to narrow the educational gaps between majority and minority groups and consequently will create harmony and resolve inter-ethnic issues.

Through a campaign called *PERMATA* (Every child is precious as a jewel), the government hopes to create awareness among *Bumiputera* parents and families of the importance of early education and care for young children (Jamil, 2010). Contrary to the minority parents, many *Bumiputera* parents lack of commitment to the importance of the early education for their children. As the results their children have minimal attainment in educational preparation to compete with minority children later in the job markets (Muthu, 2007). The government hopes that these programs would address the issue of educational opportunity and equality among ethnic groups which in reality is the issue of the economic disparity. Therefore, it is imperative for positive inter-ethnic relations that education should be based on equality and opportunity of all ethnicities. Based on this premise, educational agenda appears to be not only a critical element in solving the inter-ethnic crisis but also can be used as a spring board to the national unity.

The Ministry of Education should take the lead to develop national teaching and learning standards that incorporate components from the languages and cultures of different ethnic groups to address the issues of differences in curriculum, instruction, and teacher preparation. The government also needs to recognize Malaysia's multi-ethnic society as intellectual capital for the country by using multiple languages as media of instruction in schools. This policy seems to be an important means for satisfying minority ethnic groups' desire and needs for equality and equity in education.

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