

Tracking the Pathways of Education in Malaysia: Roots and Routes

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Abstract

Education and the schooling system in Malaysia are constant agenda in the discourse of nation-building. This is because education is regarded as an important avenue to inculcate national consciousness and social cohesion among the people. This article attempts to track the various school systems in Malaysia, with the purpose to highlight the different routes of educational choices in Malaysia. These different routes have their roots in the education policies formulated through time and the growth of a multi-ethnic population in the country. It is argued that these different routes of educational choices display ‘inclusiveness’, catering to the needs of the diverse population of Malaysia – ethnic, language, religion, regional, disability, vocation, public or private. The Malaysian education scenario represents a complexity of choices, each colouring the pathways of educational experience, expertise and engagement. The guiding question is to what extent this complexity of educational routes influence social cohesion?

Keywords: 1R + 3r, education, cultural diversity, social cohesion, social inclusion, national unity

1. Introduction

Education for social cohesion; education for national unity; education for integration – whichever phrase is used, the intent is clear. Education is an important institution for promoting unity, common citizenship and solidarity amongst its citizens of diverse backgrounds. In the context of a plural society, the role of education as a prime mover of change towards more meaningful relationships is pertinent as these meaningful relationships will lead to better social order, respect and peace in the country. However, the question that comes to mind is, how do we achieve such goals? What kind of education and education system should we have to allow us to achieve our goals, or to enable education to play its role in promoting social cohesion, unity or integration, especially so for a plural or multi-ethnic society?

These questions are by no means easy to answer. Education is such an important but complex institution in society that impacts on the lives of its people. The aims of education centre around the local conditions and aspirations. The case of the 15-year old Pakistani schoolgirl, Malala Yousufzai, who was shot at close range in an assassination attempt by Taliban gunmen on 9 October 2012 while returning home on a school bus (Wikipedia, 2012) for being an ardent advocate for girls’ right to education, serves as a poignant reminder of the contradictions and tensions surrounding who should get what kind of education, why, when, where and how.

This article focuses on the education system of Malaysia, with particular attention on the persisting discourse juxtaposing the need for a one-school, one language education system as a way to achieve national unity or social cohesion with the continued existence of vernacular schools seen as hindering the achievement of this national goal. The article argues that the Malaysian education scenario includes not only the national schools and vernacular schools, but many other types of schools. Hence, this article attempts to track the various routes of educational choices in Malaysia, with the purpose to illustrate the availability of different school systems. These different routes and choices have their roots in the education policies formulated through the passage of time and