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POLICY AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that the theme of the paper focuses on three interrelated concepts: policy, political perspectives and education. Hence, the three concepts need to be contextually defined before discussing further their inter-relationships.

The term 'policy' is an illusive concept in the sense that it has a specific definition as well as a broad and general connotation. As Cunningham (1963 : 229) suggests, 'policy is a bit like an elephant- you can recognize one when you see it, but it is somewhat more difficult to define'.

With respect to its specific definition, policy refers to a decision, common understanding or agreement arrived at through a process of accommodation or consultation or dialogue. It is a political process intended to foster changes that promote the common good of the affected public. It establishes a basis for action towards achieving the goals, philosophy and intentions of public policy direction. For example, in the Malaysian recent education policy direction, the goal is to achieve the ultimate objective of the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025 or the PPPM 2013-2025 in Malaysia. Programs for action are designed to achieve the goals as propounded by the plan. However, whether the implementation process in terms of actions and activities reflect the goals of the plan is another issue since there are always implementation gaps, deficits and cumulative deficits. Nonetheless, the policy adopted can become guidelines for behavior and evolve through societal process. The guidelines specify and maintains or even transforms the structures, relations, values, and dynamics of a society's particular way of living.

In terms of its operative definition, policy refers to any authoritative statement issued by the national government to guide and control the actions and behavior of government agencies (at all levels – federal, state or local) in the task of achieving the national objectives. However, in relation to a more generalized definition, a policy is a statement of intent towards achieving broad societal or organizational vision, mission and goals through development of programs and activities. (Hussein A., 2014).

The next terminology that needs to be defined is the concept of 'politics'. What is politics, and how does it relate to education?   In a sense, politics is a process of power seeking activities, whose critical elements – participation, choices and loyalty or domination and the behavioral concepts include among others – autocratic, democratic, laissez faire - models of political leadership behavior. In a sense, politics involves the voice of the people and public opinion towards policy making.

The last concept that needs to be understood in the context of this thematic address is the definition of 'education'. There is no doubt that a voluminous number of books and literature works have been written by scholars, researches and writers about what education means in general and specific connotations. However, in simple language, it is a process of the transfer of knowledge, skills, values and philosophy. Specifically, It is also a process of 'learning to know', 'learning to do', 'learning to live together', 'learning to be' (UNESCO's Delors Commission Report, 1992). However, for Malaysia, this definition has often been discussed and debated and found to be insufficient in terms of its operational coverage since the concept of education must include the process of 'learning to go on learning' and 'life-long education'.

Within the framework of this thematic address of policy and political perspectives in education, the fundamental questions that often arise in political discussions and debates are focused on the basic issues of education policy and the reality in terms of implementation. There are several major political issues that have often been asked; for example, who determines education policy direction? Who sets the system and structures of the educational organization? Who decides the education law, education act, regulations? And who prescribes the guidelines of implementation practice, programs and activities? In addition, as pointed out by Kenway (1990: 24), 'sociological questions are often asked, viz. Why was this policy adopted? On whose terms? Why? On what grounds have these selections been justified? Why? In whose interests? Indeed, how have competing interests been negotiated?' These are pertinent policy related questions that need to be examined when looking at the relationship between education and politics.

Educational Policy and Political Perspectives

In the following sections of the paper, the concept of education policy is discussed in the context of a theoretical framework. It is clear that following the discussions above, education policy has varied definitions and meanings since its principles, theories, concepts and assumptions vary greatly between countries. Education policy studies, research, evaluation and analyses are generally helpful in the understanding of how an education policy works. There are models of actions and implementation processes which are sometimes varied due to the existence of sub-policies. The

framework however also constitutes the process of policy implementation.

In the context of education, it is important to know that note that basically, there are fundamental conceptual issues and varying interpretations when examining the context of education policy as a subject for analysis. Nonetheless, in general, education policy issues and interpretations are varied, multidimensional and contextual. Some aspects of the policy are general, for example, the Malaysian education policy and some others are particularly focused on specific components and items. Some policy aspects are common-sense based on general and specific considerations, whereas others are particularistic in nature.

Nevertheless, regardless of the varied definitions of education policy, many are tied to the political, social, economic, cultural, racial, theological, environmental issue or ideologically based on different understandings. In essence, education policy is more than the text. It is a dynamic set of ideas and decisions or intentions based on interactive sets of ideas, views or instructions and represents a set of value positions and 'political compromises' that becomes instruments to affect change. For example, in the Malaysian context, the Education Act 1996 was designed and adopted based on inputs of the political parties that represent various ethnic, regional and social groups.

Education Policy is multi-dimensional in characteristics. Generally, it represents many different perspectives especially political, and it is the contribution of different policy actors and players particularly politicians, educational leaders and administrators, parents and teachers. Due to different sets of actors who represent different interest groups, the possibility of conflicts and contradictions between positions and 'stance' is often a matter of course. Hence decision making for policy formulation is but a complex matter. Thus, education policy is often value-laden, whether implicit or explicit. It means that values permeate an education policy since the values reflect the overall political leadership stand points. As pointed by Kenway (1990 : 24), 'whose definition and whose interest does the education policy serve' to the extent that rejection or acceptance of education policy depends on many other related intervening variables.

It should also be noted that education policy exists in contexts. It is underpinned by significance and importance of prior contexts, history or events. For example, in the Malaysian educational scene, the policy development context was underpinned by a historical context of an educational evolution from the colonial period through the period of independence and the post-independent era to the period of industrialization and globalization. In essence, it should be acknowledged that the climate of the national politics, ideological, social, cultural and linguistic issues have underpinned the policy positions that led to the current scenario of the education policy development in the country. In a sense, education policy does not exist in a vacuum.

Education policy not only reflects the political position of political party of a given nation, but also it generates series of organizational activities by different actors playing different roles in varied capacities with varying experiences. This is to ensure that the policy is generally acceptable at the national and perhaps international level and fulfil the aspirations of the national government who represent peoples of the states, districts, corporate organizations, social service organizations and political interest groups.

Politics and Education Policy Making Process

It should also be noted that an education policy involves the processes of policy making as different agenda, whether explicit or implicit, are placed on the tables for dialogues, debates and discussions in parliaments, state assemblies or in the administration rooms of government offices. The policy making processes need to involve people of different political interests or expectations from different departments and units of an education ministry. Because of its character, macro-level education policies may have sub – policies that are generally interrelated and the degree of relationships depends on many factors, for example, economic, social cultural, linguistic. Hence, understanding the linkages is critical. Given the general observations on education policy characteristics as stated above, the process of policy formulation is never simple nor straightforward. The more significant the policy and its sociopolitical impact, the greater the implications since often times policy outcomes have intended or unintended consequences.

Due to its political significance, the process of education policy making and formulation is essentially designed at the macro or national level, whereas the implementation of education policy is relegated at the meso level and more significantly at the micro level   - district, schools and classrooms. Hence, education policy making can be the concern of one or all of the levels.

An education policy change and policy reform is thus a critical area for the sustainability of an educational policy direction. It involves the processes of political rationalizations and inputs from different angles, using approaches and strategies of bottom up or top down or vice versa. Such approaches and strategies have different implications.

Political Process of Decision Making in Education Policy: Malaysian Model.

At this juncture it may be useful to summarize various models of education policy decision making. The first model relates to the common sense or rationality model it has its own strengths, weaknesses, issues and implications. The second model emphasizes the social, economic, political,

cultural and theological rationality model. All of these models have their own pro and contra arguments and have been widely debated by relevant social scientists. The third is the empirical-scientific rationality model. The implications are also widely debated because of the empirical nature of the research whose outputs and findings often become the basis of education decision making process. An example of such a model in the Malaysian education context is the national research project on School Dropouts in 1970 – 1974. The findings of the study became the basis of policy decision making that relates to many developments of education programs for the disadvantaged students (Hussein A. 2012, Ch. 4). The fourth is the behavioral rationality model which also has many types and implications.

Malaysian Experience

The framework of educational policy development in the Malaysian educational context could be conceptualized from a three-dimensional approach as indicated in Diagram 1 below. There are three external environments that seem to have a strong influence on the educational environment in schools, colleges and universities. First is the context of internal political environment whereby the socio political context of factors affect the formulation of educational law, policies and regulations. The second is the context of the socio-cultural environment. Many dominant external socio-cultural forces act on education policy development. The third is the context of internal socio-economic environment. In this factor, dominant supra- and macro-economic forces act on policy development and implementation. The relationship in terms of socio-cultural norms and values tend to influence the decision making process at the curriculum policy development level whereas the relationships in terms of socio-economic justice and benefits tend to address the issues of accessibility, equity, equality, efficiency and quality.
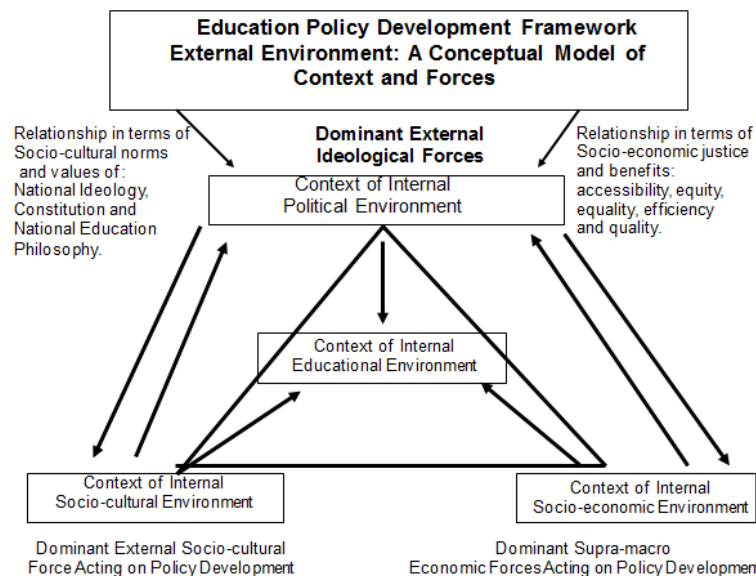

Figure 1. Diagram I

Diagram 2 below is an extension of Diagram 1, which focuses on the relationship of the variables especially on the influence of the political forces in terms of the political environment – ideology, constitution and political system - acting on the development of the national curriculum with respect to pedagogy and learning in classroom environment of schools, colleges and universities. The political forces also have an influence on human resource strategies in terms of selection, training, staffing, improvements and quality standards and structure, systems, regulations and guidelines. In essence, the political forces have an influence on the overall educational system, not only in respect of co-curriculum, but also on the flow of student population from different regions, districts, towns and religions.

**Education Policy Framework
Contextual Factors**

Political Forces and Influence

Context of Internal Socio-
Political Environment – ideology, constitution and
political system

Context of Educational
Organization:
structure, system, regulations,
rule
and guide line

Context of pedagogy and learning in
classroom environment:
school, colleges and university

Context of
Human resource
Strategies:
selection,
Training, Staffing
improvement,
and Quality
Standard

Context of: Student Population and Cohort from
different regions, district towns and villages

Context of Internal
Socio-cultural Policy
Environment: National Policies
on language , culture, religion,
heritage etc.

Context of Internal
Socio-economic Policy
Environment: National Policies
on economic development,
industrialization, agriculture,
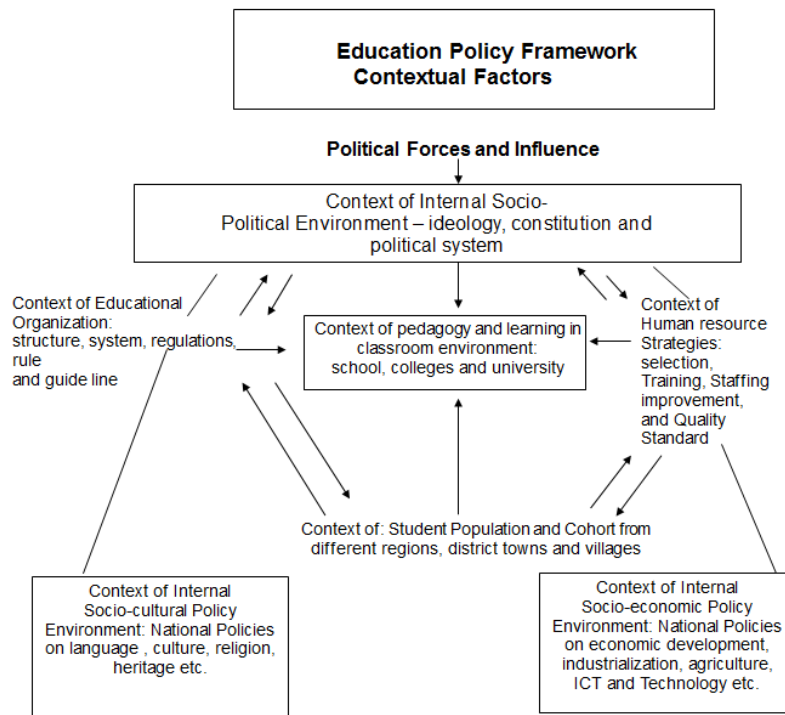ICT and Technology etc.

Figure 2.   Digram I

Diagram III below is a summary of the framework of political orientation in national education policy development with respect to the contents of curriculum components in the context of Malaysian education settings. Not only the principles of the national ideology but also the philosophy, policy and Education Act 1966 and goals and challenges of vision 2020 tend to have some influence in the contents and process, knowledge disciplines and subject areas, both in the curriculum and co-curriculum aspects.

**Framework of Political Orientation in National
Education Policy Development (Curriculum Component) in
Malaysia**

Cultural, socio-
economic
and political
environment

**Philosophy, Policy and
Education Act (1996)**

Cultural, socio-economic
and political environment

**Principles of the
National Ideology
(Rukun Negara)**

**Goals and challenges
of Vision 2020**

**Content & Process
Knowledge Disciplines
and Subject Areas and
Skills – Curriculum and
Co-curriculum**

**STUDENT
INPUT**

**STUDENT
OUTPUT**

**Policies of
Development
eg. Human
Resource
(staffing)
Infrastructure
Supplies**

**Goals of Excellence
in Education**

**Issues & challenges of globalization
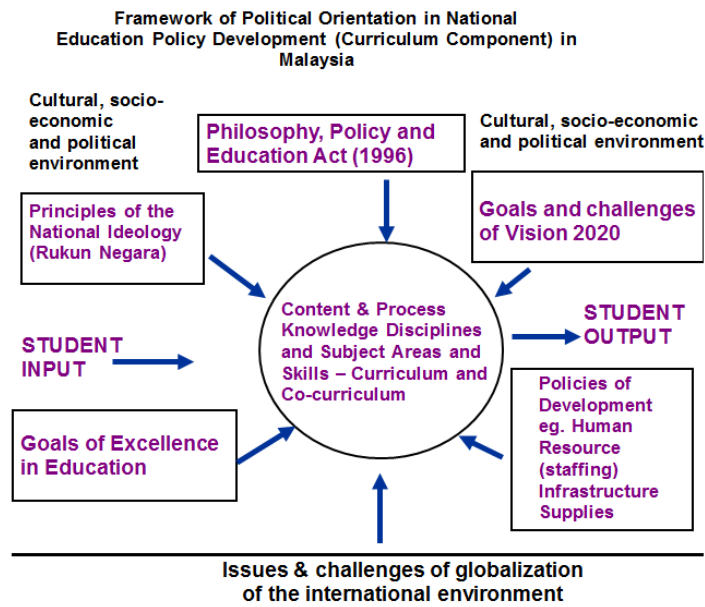of the international environment**

Figure 3.   Diagram III

In Diagram iv below, the discussion is focused on stages of the education policy making process which involves the elements of political determination. The stages principally covers the determination of goals, needs assessment, specification of objectives, design on alternative courses of action, estimation of consequences of alternative actions, selection of courses of action, implementation. The evaluation stage provides a feedback to the decision makers for reviews on the progress of implementing the education policy.

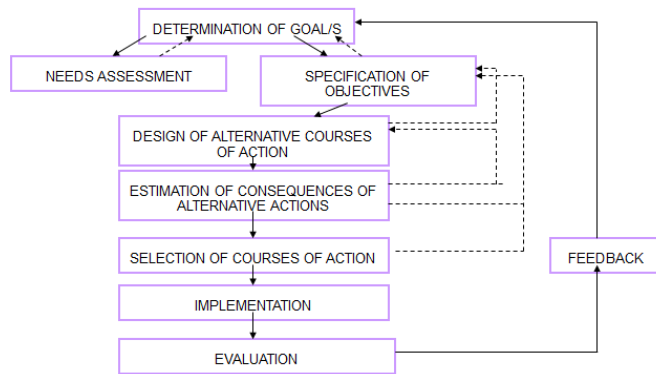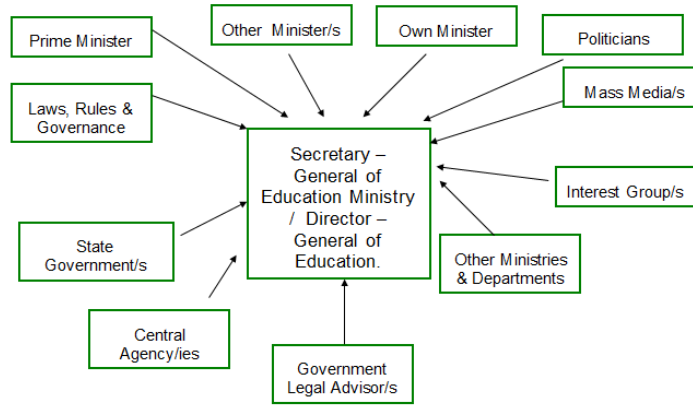16

EDUCATION POLICY-MAKING PROCESS: STAGES

Figure 4.   Diagram IV

A MODEL OF EDUCATION
POLICY DIALOGUES IN MALAYSIA
(Problem Identification and Objective Setting)

Process, Submissions, Directives, Bargaining and Compromise

Figure 5.   Diagram V

Diagram v above shows a model of education-political dialogues in the Malaysian educational settings especially in terms of problem identification and objective settings. Basically, the whole process involves submissions of education policy plans to the offices of the secretary general of the education ministry and the director general of education. The decision making process involves bargaining and compromises with inputs from various agencies of the government and politicians of various political parties.

POLITICAL PARTY MODEL OF EDUCATION LAW AND POLICY
MAKING IN MALAYSIA
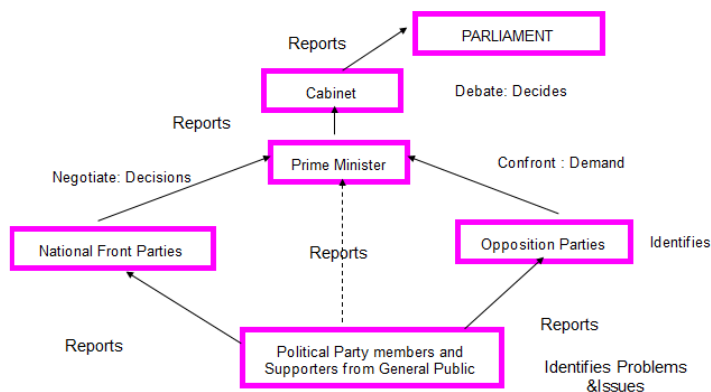(Problem identification, levels of debates, dialoges and final decision making)

Figure 6.   Diagram VI

Diagram vi above indicates the process of policy making and the determination of an education policy law. Initial reports are submitted and discussed by political party members and supporters from the general public. The reports are discussed by the ruling national front party and opposition parties. Negotiations and decisions are generally submitted to the office of the prime ministers to be discussed by the cabinet of the government before tabling the documentation of the reports in parliament.

Conclusion

The paper attempts to discuss the issues of policy and political perspectives in education in a cursory manner. Indeed, the relationship of the three concepts is a tenuous one. However, each of the concepts has its own characteristics not only in terms of systems and structures, but also in terms of practice and implementation. The paper also attempted to indicate the processes involved in education policy and policy making in education on the basis of the Malaysian experience.

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