Discovering Social Actors' Experiences to different Schooling System in Malaysian Multicultural Society: 'National Unity' Perspective

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Abstract
This paper investigates the insights and experiences of multiple social actors towards different streaming school and to examine in what ways 'national unity' is affected by a different streaming school in Malaysia particularly within a multicultural society. Although the discussion in this paper is related to the Malaysian educational system, the social actors that contribute to this discussion are not the ones involved in policy making or policy executing. Data from the study came from twenty semi-structured and six focus group interviews with social actors of different ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indians). The use of thematic analysis in analyzing interview data for this study reveals the paradoxes in social actors' perceptions and different experiences towards the schooling system. The findings show that there should be a dynamic and peaceful coexistence of diversity of culture so that none of the members of the society feel marginalized especially the minority and subcultures.
Keywords: Streaming Schools, Social Actors, Schooling System, 'National Unity', And Malaysian Multicultural Society.

Introduction
        A school is often perceived as a place of acquiring knowledge and skills development for becoming a person, and often ignored about the role that the school plays as a 'nationalizing force' for producing equality in a society (Sterzuk, 2011). As the school is an educational institution for knowledge-building, it is also a place where students are socialized into views, religious, and cultural identity, especially living in a society of a diverse ethnic population. By socializing with other students, the process of learning begins to nurture students' development, traits, and personalities, thus enabling them to participate in a group life (Feinberg, 1998; Sterzuk, 2011). More important, the process of learning is not only covering the personal and social developments, but also the national aspect which is necessary for producing the nation in order to understand how people live and organize the World. This paper is, therefore, interested in the idea of the nation by focusing on 'national unity' as it argues that a school is an ideal place for learning and understanding cultural differences. In this paper, we will make explicit how the insights and experiences of multiple

social actors influence the field of education and thus contribute to the process of fostering 'national unity'. To have a better understanding of the context of the investigation, the next paragraph discusses post-colonialism in Malaysia and how 'national unity' is related to the national education system.

Malaysian Educational History

During the post-colonial era, Malaysia has undergone several changes brought by the colonial power. Although the British colonization left a system that benefits the society such as development in education, judiciary, industry, modern scientific and transportation (Wan Teh, 2011), colonialism also brought changes in the politic, economic, and social structure of the society (Embong, 2014; Wan Teh, 2011). Those changes have led to a struggle among ethnic communities in terms of the practice of cultural constituents, the share of political power, educational system, and distribution of economic wealth. This paper only focuses on the struggle from the educational point of view. One of the consequences of British colonization was the evolving of the plural educational system with four different streams of school: English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools (Joseph, 2008). Those schools were relatively free to follow the different curriculum, teach in their own language and use textbooks that were mostly foreign-oriented. The objective of education during the colonial era was to provide basic education for the children in their own language so that they were prepared for their allotted role in the colonial scheme (Joseph, 2008). For that reason, Joseph (2008, p.186) argued that the education for children was also determined by 'ethnic identification with a specific economic role' which in return may serve the British's interest. As a consequence, the British 'divide and rule' policy and the practice of separate educational system perpetuated the social and economic inequalities between the ethnic groups (Grapragasem, Krishnan, & Mansor, 2014; Joseph, 2008).

The use of education in facilitating national integration started with the introduction of the Razak Report 1956, a government educational blueprint of establishing a national education system that would be acceptable by all ethnic groups (Ministry of Education, 1956). Specifically, the report outlined a proposal intended for:

"A national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country" (Ministry of Education, 1956, p. 1).

The implementation of The *Razak Report 1956* has also guaranteed that all children regardless of ethnicity, geographical location or socio-economic background received fair access to school with a good learning and teaching environment that celebrated unity in diversity (Ministry of Education, 1956). Following the country's independence of 1957, the post-colonial government has introduced a national education system using a standardized language of instruction, curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, and trained teachers (Grapragasem et al., 2014). The objective of the national education system is to foster unity through the integration of the multiethnic and multicultural population (Cheah, 2002; Grapragasem et al., 2014). To foster integration, the government had enacted the Education Act 1961 which focused on three main plans: 1) the standardization of the school system; 2) the use of national language (Malay) as the medium of instruction (with the exception of Chinese and

Tamil primary schools); 3) and the nationalisation of curriculum and school examinations (Wan Husin, 2011). Beginning in 1971, education in Malaysia was expected to support the economic growth and foster national integration of various ethnic groups (Cheah, 2002). Realizing the importance of education for the country, the Report of the Cabinet Committee 1979 addressed the inadequacies of education as well as social education through an effective measure of promoting integrated learning in strengthening the unity and progressiveness of all groups (Quek, 2008). For example, the application of science and technology in school curriculum is considered as part of integrative learning to build a progressive nation (Quek, 2008).

Despite the implementation of the national education system, certain parts of the system still implement the 'divide and rule' policy when it comes to schooling system. The schooling system adopted by the colonial power, for instance, has been identified as a barrier to unity among ethnic groups. According to Feinberg (1998), the unity of the nation can be fostered when children are taught to respect others regardless of cultural backgrounds and to treat other people as equal in order to build a larger national community from diverse ethnic origins. Although several researchers already found that a school is an important place to build the unity of the nation through ethnic relations (Cheah, 2002; Feinberg, 1998; Grapragasem et al., 2014; Joseph, 2008), vernacular schools still exist in Malaysia. In specific, the public primary schools still practice different streams of school (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools) which isolate the children from the very beginning to learn and understand the uniqueness of different cultures and ethnics. This paper, therefore, examines the insights and experiences of different social actors towards the schooling system and they are not directly or indirectly involved in the creation and execution of the educational policy. The reason for examining social actors from the non-educational background is to garner different perspective towards the Malaysian educational policy by focusing on the schooling system. More importantly, this paper aims to discover the social actors' responses towards the schooling system and how it is associated with the process of maintaining 'national unity' in Malaysia through the following questions:

1. How are the social actors of different ethnic groups associate their experiences of going through the Malaysian schooling system with 'national unity'?
2. What are the insights that can be shared by the social actors of different ethnic groups in relations to Malaysian schooling system and 'national unity'?

The next section articulates the meaning of 'national unity' and how the meaning differs from nationalism.

Defining 'National Unity'
The understanding of 'national unity' varies from one country to another. The concept is also understood differently from various perspectives by a number of scholars. This section clarifies what is meant by the term 'national unity' broadly in order to understand the concept beyond the context of the research investigation. 'National unity' in this paper is different from the understanding of nationalism. While nationalism has been debated extensively in certain European and Asian countries for its problematic practice of empowering one nation over the other (Anghie, 2006), 'national unity' celebrates the differences in a multiethnic society. National unity, according to Amienyi (2005) is a sense of belonging among people from different ethnic, religious, and socio-cultural backgrounds focusing on the collective attention of having relations with the national community for the attainment of mutually beneficial national goals. In this light, 'national unity' is closely related to the idea of national

cohesion. National cohesion occurs when people of a multicultural society have shared values and norms, acknowledged their collective identities, and their interdependence among members of the society (Najafpour & Harsij, 2013).

From the Malaysian perspective, the concept of unity means "people embrace a diversity of ethnicity, religions, and beliefs and, by being inclusive, build mutual respect and acceptance into a solid foundation of trust and cohesiveness" (Department of Prime Minister Malaysia, 2010). 'National unity' in Malaysia envisages people who are living in the same country, regardless of their different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds and who are committed to work together as one united nationality based on the country's constitution and the national principle (Department of National Unity and Integration Malaysia, n.d.). The National Principle (*Rukun Negara*) is one of the foundations of nationhood that ensure fairness and social justice to all regardless of ethnicity, religions, political inclination, geographical or socio-economic context (Department of Prime Minister Malaysia, 2010).

Ongoing Challenges for 'National Unity' from Educational Perspective
Although the diversity of the nation offers uniqueness to a country due to a multitude of cultures, languages, customs and religions, it also poses challenges to 'national unity' in a multi-ethnic society (Hashim & Tan, 2009). As such, 'national unity' in Malaysia is challenged by the ongoing merit-based education, the use of Malay as the country's official language, and ethnic-based political power (Embong, 2014; Hashim & Tan, 2009). The problem with ethnic segregation that transpired among ethnic groups in Malaysia are not only because of their differences in languages, cultures, and religions, but also because of the educational system that caused "ethnic groups live in segregated physical location" (Department of Prime Minister Malaysia, 2010, p. 56) during their learning process. So, regardless of the efforts that have been done by several agencies including government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to maintain unity, however, if the root cause of the issue is not given the attention, it may continue to be the barriers to 'national unity'.

A testament to a problematic 'national unity' can be seen in the relationship amongst young people from major ethnicity in Malaysia. Young people are a particularly problematic demographic because some of them are no longer close to one another and the spirit of unity among the younger generation is waning at the present time (Abd Muis et al., 2012). This phenomenon poses a big question mark of whether the current schooling system is associated with the process of strengthening 'national unity' and relationship of people of different ethnic groups. Even after more than half a century of independence, these relationships are still retaining the status quo as before the formation of modern Malaysia (Abd Muis et al., 2012). Although numerous approaches and campaigns have been implemented, and some of the programs are still ongoing, the call for 'national unity' is still not well-received by various ethnic groups. Abd Muis et al. (2012) expressed their concern that the relationship between ethnic in Malaysia may be thought as harmonious, but the reality is far from the truth. While Malaysia has been considered as a model for practicing compromises and harmony among different ethnics and praised by other countries, the problem of racial disunity will potentially cause social and economic instability if it is allowed to continue without any effort to overcome it. This paper is not intended to solve the problems of 'national unity' among ethnic groups; rather, it is to understand the problem which needs some attention for academic discussion and debates.

Research Methodology

A total of six focus group interviews of different Malaysian ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) were used to gather data from young and older adults to discover their insights and experiences about the Malaysian schooling system. These interviews with a different ethnic group aimed to gain a better understanding of individual responses from different perspectives (Patton, 2015) towards the schooling system. The focus group interviews comprised of participants of different socio-economic characteristics such as parents, non-academic officers, higher education students, local chiefs and individuals who speak from their experiences, especially those who have gone through several phases of change in the Malaysian education system. The discussion in this paper only focuses on the first part of the interview questions where participants were asked about their understanding of 'national unity' and how an educational system affects ethnic relations in a diverse ethnic society. Apart from the focus group discussion, semi-structured interviews with twenty government officials from the non-educational background were also conducted to discover their insights about different streaming schools in Malaysia. Interviews with social actors are particularly useful for gathering information about the schooling system in order to gain access to a group of people relating to their deep insights into certain situations, people or settings (Patton, 2015).

Since this study involves human participants, the ethical clearance in accordance with ethical research standards has been granted before conducting the fieldwork. Prior to participation in this study, respondents were provided with an information sheet and informed consent form to read and sign (Patton, 2015). The information sheet explains to participants the relevant information about this research such as the research purpose, benefits and the rights of respondents as a part of their participation in this study. However, there were also some situations where the moderator was asked to provide the summary of the information sheet. The consent form specifies that individuals who participate in this research will do so willingly, completely voluntary and will in no way affect their study, job, or any employment evaluations (Patton, 2015). Besides, they were also informed that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any action taken against them.

Using *Atlas.ti*, specific codes and categories were developed from the interview data and then analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings and discussions

As social actors reflected their experiences with different streaming schools and 'national unity', the findings discover three themes that emerged from social actors' responses – conflicting language and culture, preserving cultural identity, and integrating cultural differences. The descriptions of each theme and some empirical illustrations from interview data are explained below.

I. *Conflicting language and culture*

While education is considered as a tool for nation-building, the government also believes that the important component of nation-building in strengthening the educational aspect and other related aspects is through 'national unity' and national cohesion (Najafpour & Harsij, 2013; Wan Husin, 2011). Due to that, educational policies had been reviewed to meet the demand of creating the schooling system in Malaysia as a platform for constructing 'national unity' among different ethnic groups. However, the current schooling system as claimed by Jamil and Raman (2012) is difficult to develop a good relationship and ethnic integration among children of multi-ethnic society due to the language barrier. They further argued that the mother tongue education and different medium of instruction are among the

factors that contribute to ethnic segregation (Jamil & Raman, 2012). The responses shared by some of the participants are demonstrated below:

> *Indian participant G3-MT: I do agree that vernacular schools affect the relationship between people of different ethnics. I want to share my experience as well as my friends' experience. From what I have seen, many of my friends, they have difficulty to interact with Malays or Chinese. Some of my friends who are from SRJK Tamil told me that it is difficult to get along with other groups because they can't really speak Bahasa (Malay language). The same thing goes to Chinese people, some of my friends who are from SRJKC, they only communicate in their mother tongue and they don't really know Bahasa well. Because of the language barrier, they find difficult to communicate with other group and therefore, they prefer to have friends from their own group.*

> *Indian participant G3-TH: To me, there are pros and cons having vernacular schools. On one side, yes it is difficult to communicate with other group because they only know their mother tongue very well. Now, Kebangsaan School also has Tamil subject. So, Indians still can take the subject at the Kebangsaan School, but not all schools offer that subject. So, our people are still afraid if they can't learn Tamil.*

This paper does not intend to argue the effect of educational policy on the schooling system rather, to understand how participants' experiences of the current schooling system are connected with 'national unity' process. Interestingly, many participants agree that different streaming schools not only restrict the ability to learn about other people's language and culture, but also limit the interaction with other ethnic groups. Other participants reinforced this collective experience as shown below:

> *Chinese participant G2-JH: In my opinion, vernacular school is one of the reasons that affect ethnic relations in Malaysia. It is not the main reason, but an important reason. Before I do my sharing, just now other participants said that we should not retain the vernacular schools. This is very difficult to take action. In this country we promote democracy, we want to retain the Mandarin class studies hours in school, but the Malays want Bahasa Melayu class studies hours to be more. So to comprise of one school is very difficult except if there are external forces from outside.*

> *Malay participant G4-LZ: "When I was in a primary school, there's only Malay (no other ethnic groups). And then during my secondary school (Form 1-4) at national religious school, it was a girl's school and again no other ethnic groups except Malays. When I moved to the National school (mix with other ethnic groups) during Form 5, I felt a bit weird. Although there was no Chinese and Indian student in my class, but other classes, they have Chinese and Indian students. So, when I have to mix with other ethnic groups, I felt so awkward. At the beginning, I felt like I do not want to get close to them (other ethnic groups) because I had never done so before…"*

II. Preserving cultural identity

People use language for different purposes. There are two important purposes of language which relate to the findings in this discussion. Essentially, language is not only a medium for communication, but also an instrument of cultural identity (Phan, Kho, & Ching, 2013). Through communication, language can be a vital key to building relationships with other people as well as to make sense of the World (Wang & Phillion, 2009). Apart from communication, language is strongly linked to preserving the cultural identity of a specific ethnic group. Some participants believed that having vernacular schools in Malaysia is not a reason that undermines 'national unity' among different ethnic groups; rather it is for the preservation of mother tongue, culture, and religion. This is also agreed by Najafpour and Harsij (2013) that good governance of a multicultural society is not simply about the homogenization of culture but more towards ensuring the confluence of each' ethnic group's culture in strengthening national cohesion. These findings suggest that multicultural education must develop culturally and linguistically inclusion in school curriculum so that minority ethnic groups feel that their knowledge, culture, and language are not marginalized (Wang & Phillion, 2009). Some illustrative data which are empirically analyzed are shown below:

> *Malay participant NR: In my personal opinion, I believe when the Ministry of Education has accepted the concept of implementing the school system according to specific races (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), they have certain objectives or goals to be achieved. In other words, this implementation has pros and cons. I believe any groups, for example, the Chinese community with Chinese national-type schools or Indian national-type schools; they have something to strive for, or certain norms to be maintained so that their cultural practices especially their mother tongue can be preserved.*

> *Chinese participant G2-LM: I feel that vernacular school is not the main reason of having difficulty to join other races. Actually, we all want to learn or mother language. So, we have to know other languages too in order to communicate with others. That is impossible to integrate the multi races into one ethnic group because we all have our own languages.*

> *Indian participant G3-PP: Vernacular schools are only meant to preserve our mother tongue and also the religion. I send my children to SRJK Tamil because when I went to Malay school, I didn't know how to read and write in Tamil. I can only speak Tamil. So, it is ashamed. Ok, although I was from Malay school, I don't have a problem working with the Chinese. I worked 8 years in a Chinese company and I am the only Indian in the company.*

III.   *Integrating cultural differences*

In the previous discussion, some participants expressed their difficulty in mixing with other ethnic groups due to language and cultural issue; other participants manage to overcome this barrier through integrating cultural differences when they have gone through this exposure since young. Although it is difficult to go through the process of understanding a different culture and language, as one participant suggested that the learning process of other people's culture should begin during childhood: "To me, it is important for people to learn from the very beginning (from small) especially the culture because every ethnic's culture is different (Chinese, Indians, and Malays). For example, a Malay Muslim must pray so it will be easier if

other ethnic groups understand about this so when we are working with the Chinese or the boss is Chinese, they know our prayer time and respect that we have to pray during working hours" (Malay participant G1-ND). Similarly, there were participants who also shared that it was easy to mix around with people of different races when the school is mixed with different ethnic groups. Their sharing about the school's experience is shown below:

> *Malay participant G1-PJ: I would like to share my own experience. When I was in Grade 3, my family and I moved to Bagan Datoh. That was my first experience learned in school that is mixed with other ethnic group. There is no Chinese student in my school because not far from the school there was a Chinese school. So, many of my friends were Indians and we could easily get along. I could see changes in me. I'm more open-minded and have different ways of thinking. So migration is definitely very good. It really worked for me. Islam also talks about migration. What I want to say here is, the school system that is mixed with all the races is better and of course, there are also weaknesses.*

> *Chinese participant G2-LG: I feel that we should not retain the vernacular schools because if we are separated, we will know only how to speak Mandarin, Malays know only Bahasa Melayu, Indians know only Tamil. We are One Malaysia; we should know other languages as well.*

In contrast, there was also a participant who believed that vernacular school is meant to preserve the mother tongue. Interestingly, the participant was able to understand about the other student's language and culture because there was a student from the different ethnic group in the class during the school time. As such, the participant didn't have any difficulty mingling with other people of different races. For example, the participant expressed:

> *Indian participant G4-KT: I am from Tamil school. During my school time, there was also a Malay student studying there too. So, I could speak Bahasa and befriend with the Malay friend. When I get into this university, I don't see any differences because from the Tamil school, then I went to National secondary school (SMK), I don't feel any differences. I can mix around with other ethnic groups. The vernacular school is actually for students to learn about mother tongue, not for certain races.*

Other participants who have shared about their school experiences also believed that 'to cultivate the spirit of unity', it should begin from the childhood time where children can easily learn the differences in culture, religious practices, and ethics where these experiences can also form a certain kind of understanding and respect about people of different ethnic groups (Malay participant SK; Malay participant JM; Chinese participant LE; Malay participant PS).

Conclusion

The findings reveal that there are similarities and differences of views and experiences of social actors concerning different streaming schools and 'national unity'. As suggested by Jamil and Raman (2012), 'there are always opposing discourses' concerning 'national unity' among people of different ethnic groups and educational policy specifically the schooling system. While different streaming schools can cater the needs of other ethnic groups in terms of preserving their cultural identities through the use of their mother tongue as the medium

of instruction in schools, it also associates directly or indirectly with the process of maintaining 'national unity'. This finding reflects Wang and Phillion's (2009) suggestion that by having language and culture inclusion in the multicultural education system (such as vernacular schools), they provide a friendly and supportive environment for minority ethnic groups' learning process. The theme 'conflicting language and culture' concurs with Feinberg's standpoint that cultural tension does occur when people have not exposed from the very beginning the uniqueness of different culture and languages (Feinberg, 1998). Similarly, the theme 'integrating cultural differences' also support that the process of 'unity in diversity' begins at school where 'national unity' can be fostered when children learn to communicate and interact respectfully and prudently with other people of different ethnic groups. As far as this paper concerns, there may be other factors that are associated with the process of 'national unity' other than the schooling system, and therefore we suggest to future researchers who are interested in this kind of research to investigate the factors that may challenge 'national unity'.

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