UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL CHOICE FOR PRIVATE AND NATIONAL SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR NATIONAL UNITY

BY

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Kulliyyah of Education
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ABSTRACT

In the modern system of education, parents have been given the right to choose the type of school for their children. Several studies indicated that parental choice has become a more prominent factor of many types of segregations including ethnic and religious segregation. In the Malaysian context, ethnic segregation is more prevalent due to the multicultural nature of the country. Moreover, in addition to the existing debate of public vs private choice, Malaysian education system features Islamic schools which provide education for Muslim students and ethnic-based schools that officially accommodate the use of Mandarin and Tamil as medium of instruction and provide ethnically homogenous learning environment. Thus, the system gives little chance for Malaysians to interracially interact, and at the end creates a hindrance to national unity. This study was an attempt to understand parental choice of Private and National schools and its implication for national unity. The qualitative case study method was employed in this research. The data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews of 13 informants from different backgrounds of ethnicity such as Malay, Chinese and Indian who send their children to National School, National Type Chinese School, National Type Indian School and Private School. The study came up with 6 themes namely: Parents’ rationality factors, ethnic and cultural factors, elements of national unity, integration of multicultural differences, education reform for national unity and socio implication of parental choice. It was found that beside rationality factors which influenced parental choice, cultural and religious factors play significant role in motivating parents to choose school for their children. The study uncovered parents’ perception on fostering national unity through education which reflects both pluralist and assimilationist approach in multicultural education. Majority of the informants suggested that national education system should be revised in order to cater to the mission of multicultural integration through education. Finally, the study discovered that beside the implication on national unity, parental choice can potentially lead to socio-economic polarization of society.
خلاصة البحث

يكلف نظام التعليم الحديث حق الآباء في اختيار نوعية المدارس المناسبة لأطفالهم، وقد أشارت العديد من الدراسات إلى أن اختيار الوالدين أصبح عاملاً بارزاً في وجود العديد من أنواع التمييز، بما في ذلك التمييز العرقي. في السياق الماليزي، يلاحظ أن التمييز العرقي أكثر انتشاراً بسبب طبيعة البلد القائمة على تعدد الثقافات. علاوة على ذلك، وبالإضافة إلى الجدل الدائر حول عملية اختيار نوعية المدرسة بين القطاعين العام والخاص، فإن نظام التعليم الماليزي سمح بإنشاء مدارس إسلامية للمسلمين ومدارس ذات أسس عرقية تبني رسميًا استخدام لغة الماندرين والتاميل لغةً للتعليم، وتتوفر في الوقت نفسه بيئة تعليمية متجانسة عرقياً. وبالتالي، فإن النظام التعليمي الماليزي قد قلص فرصة الماليزيين في حدوث نوع من التفاعل بين الأعراق المختلفة في المجتمع، وبناءً عليه فقد خلق عقبة أمام الوحدة الوطنية. وقد أجريت هذه الدراسة بغية فهم طبيعة اختيار الوالدين للمدارس الخاصة والوطنية وتأثير ذلك الاختيار على الوحدة الوطنية. تبنت هذه الدراسة أسلوب دراسة الحالة كأحد أنواع الدراسات النوعية. تم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلات مركزية شبه متناقضة شملت 13 مشاركًا من خلفيات عرقية متعددة وكذلك من نوويات مدارس مختلفة. تلخصت الدراسة 6 أفكارًا رئيسية وهي العامل المنطقي والعوامل الثقافية والدينية وعناصر تعزيز الوحدة الوطنية ودمج الاختلافات بين الثقافات والآثار الاجتماعية من اختيار الوالدين لتعليم مدارس. وقد توصلت الدراسة إلى أنه إلى جانب العامل المنطقي الذي أثر على اختيار الوالدين لنوعية المدارس، لعبت العوامل الثقافية والدينية دورًا مهمًا في تفسير الآباء على اختيار مدارس بعينها لأطفالهم. كشفت الدراسة كذلك عن طبيعة تصورات الوالدين لعملية تعزيز الوحدة الوطنية من خلال التعليم، تلك التصورات التي عكست كلًا من مبدأ التعدد الثقافي والاستيعاب الثقافي في نظام تعليمي متعدد الثقافات. اقترح غالبية المشاركين أنه ينبغي مراجعة نظام التعليم الوظيفي من أجل استيعاب ودمج الثقافات المتعددة. أخيرًا، أكملت الدراسة أنه إلى جانب تأثيره المباشر على عملية الوحدة الوطنية، لا يستبعد أن يؤدي اختيار الوالدين لنوعية المدارس إلى حدوث استقطاب اجتماعي-اقتصادي في المجتمع.
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Faisal Sundani Kamaludin

Signature: .................................. Date: ..............................................
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, all glory is due to Allah, the Almighty, who has bestowed His graces and mercies during the completion of this long and challenging journey.

It is my utmost pleasure to dedicate this work to my late mother Allah yarham Sariyah Rusliana, my father KH Kamaludin, ibu Ida Hamidah, mama Elly Risman, ayah Risman Musa and my beloved wife Rosalina Risman who granted me the gift of their unwavering belief in my ability to accomplish this goal: thank you for your support and patience. This work is also dedicated to my children, Azzama, Abdul Malik and Abdurrahman, with the wish that they will regard this as a benchmark which could be superseded in their academic endeavour.

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<tr>
<td>MARA</td>
<td>Majlis Amanat Rakyat</td>
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<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy</td>
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<td>NPE</td>
<td>National Philosophy of Education</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
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<td>NLP</td>
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<td>Student’s Integration Plan for Unity</td>
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<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malays National Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBP</td>
<td>Full Boarding School</td>
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<td>SK</td>
<td>National School</td>
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<tr>
<td>SKJC</td>
<td>National Type Chinese School</td>
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<tr>
<td>SKJT</td>
<td>National Type Tamil School</td>
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<tr>
<td>UM</td>
<td>University Malaya</td>
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<td>UiTM</td>
<td>Universiti Teknologi Mara</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The educational sector has been highlighted to be a very important contributing factor in the socio-economic development of a country. It affects a country’s economic growth through knowledge and skills development by improving human capabilities, as well as ensuring that individuals are confident, more socially aware and physically active. On top of that, education has always been the avenue to propagate the ideology of any country, and Malaysia is not exempted from that.

As a country which features ethnic diversity, Malaysia faces challenges in terms of inculcating national identity and unity within a plural society. There is always the possibility that the quest of each ethnic group to maintain its culture, religion and language may contradict with the central government’s efforts in nation-building and integration. In addition, tensions among ethnic groups may occur in issues pertaining to distribution of economic wealth and social services, and decisions regarding the national and official languages, political supremacy and cultural interests. This diversity, especially when special privileges are given to some groups and some are denied from opportunities to participate, may create ethnic inequality and ethnic polarization, leading to contentions, instability, and upheaval (Hashim, 2009).

In order to overcome the above possibilities, The Malaysian government is working to foster national unity based on an ethnic national identity through the curriculum, especially through civics, history, moral education, and Islamic education (Hashim, 2009)
As the educational sector becomes more commodified with more involvement of private institutions it gives alternative to parents to choose school that suit their children. It is a common practice for parents to ensure the best possible educational environment for their children. In addition, protecting and promoting safety and health of children are one of parents’ responsibilities in maintaining their development and welfare.

Since the last few decades, private sectors in Malaysia emerged as an essential source of educational provider at all levels. Many private education institutions in Malaysia are working on their performance by stabilizing their financial circumstances even if they have to take unpopular decision such as increasing fee collection.

Since many types of schools have grown and are accessible to people in many countries, the new role of choosing the right schools for their children to attend has been granted to parents (Pamela Munn, 1993). They are given freedom to choose any type that suits their goal, objective and financial ability.

Public school system is the default of national education in many countries in the world. As it is the responsibility of the government to provide the best yet affordable education for their citizens. In Malaysia, over ten thousands public schools strategically spread throughout the country. These government-funded schools require parents to pay only minimal fees, so that each and every Malaysian child will have access to education. This public school system is divided into two types namely national school (sekolah kebangsaan in Malays, often abbreviated as SK), and national type schools (sekolah jenis kebangsaan, often abbreviated as SJK). National type schools are further divided into two national type Chinese school and national type Tamil school. There are 5877 national primary schools, 1297 Chinese primary
schools, and 524 Tamil primary schools in Malaysia (MOE, 2016) with a total population of 6.69 million and 2.01 million respectively. See figure 1.1 and 1.2.

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<td>4,452</td>
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<td>5,647</td>
<td>7,751</td>
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<td>7,762</td>
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Notes: * Data as of 31st January
** Data as of 31st May 2015
Source: Educational Planning and Resource Division

Figure 1.1 Types and Number of MOE Primary Schools 2014-2016
Education in Malaysia has made tremendous progress since its independence in 1957. At the time of Independence, over half the population missed formal schooling, while only 6% of Malaysian children had enjoyed secondary level of education, and a paltry 1% to the post-secondary level (Malaysia 2013, Exhibit 4).

Malaysia’s ambition towards excellence in education can be seen from its huge investment over 55 years ever since independence. As early as 1980, Malaysia federal government’s spending on primary and secondary education, as a percentage of Gross
Domestic Product (GDP), was the highest in East Asia. In 2011, the amount spent, at 3.8% of GDP or 16% of total government spending, and in 2012, with an education budget of RM36 billion, the Government has continued to devote the largest proportion of its budget, 16% to the Ministry. Thus, the country’s education is expected to be competitive at the regional, or, even the International level.

In response to the new trend of educational objective, which emphasizes more on developing soft skills, and to focus more on continuous assessments and independent learning, as well as to promote active learning and nurturing well-rounded individuals, the Ministry of Education implemented the Malaysian Education Blueprint in 2012 with the aspiration to reduce the emphasis on examinations and rote learning. Hence, the government has been working hard in enhancing the quality of the public school.

In addition to the various types of national schools as discussed, as a country with a strong relation to Islam, Islamic schools have been a strong feature since the pre-occupation of the British period, when parents used to send their children to religious teachers to be educated with reading of the Qur’an and the basics of Islamic education. Back then, this form of education was called Quranic schools (Miller, 1968; Madale, 1981).

These schools later on continue to develop and evolve to a more organized and systematized institutions. The system of Islamic education has been continually enhanced and broadened its curriculum after independence, by including subjects that are now offered in the national examination at the lower, upper and higher secondary levels (Hashim, 2004). Islamic schools with many names and types, are a popular choice for Malay parents who are concerned with preserving their religious belief. Hence, Malaysian parents now have the choice of either national schools, national
type of schools, private schools, International schools or Islamic schools for the primary levels for the primary level. For the secondary level they have the choice of national schools, Chinese independent schools, Islamic religious schools, and profit based private and International schools.

As schooling remains the right of parents all over the world, Malaysian parents are given the freedom to choose any type of schools.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
In the modern system of education, parents have an important role in the direction and development of their children’s education. Furthermore, when private sectors are granted permits to provide educational services, schools have evolved to be a marketable product. Hence, sociologists in education suggest a new role ascribed to the parents, that is, the role of customers of educational service.

The issue of “school choice” had arisen in the United States of America, Canada and other countries in Europe since more than two decades ago. In response to the demands of “school choice,” the choice movement in America resulted in magnet schools and a voucher system to accommodate parental choice in education (Ballantine, 2001).

The pros and contradictions of Private Schools’ choice over Public (National) Schools have attracted large scale of attentions from not only educationists but also economists, sociologists, physiologists, and policy makers. In spite of the debate, very little is known as variables of parental choice of Private and Public schools.

In terms of education, there is no doubt that all parents naturally aspire the best for their children. This includes their responsibility to safeguard their children as well as promote their health, well being, development and welfare.
In the Malaysian context, school choice is also viewed as critical and challenging issue as parents would grapple at the multitude of factors that influence their decisions, as it is crucial to determine what kind of educational milieu and experience they want for their children.

Beside the issue of educational preferences in choosing schools, the country also offers options of vernacular schools that provide education presented in mother tongues beside the national language. Hence, Malaysian education system allows parent to choose along ethnic, language and religious delineations. Parents are free to opt for their children to be enrolled in National, Chinese or Tamil medium schools, or for Islamic schools which are run either by the government or as private ventures.

Ethnic consideration is a part of the features of choices in Malaysia, despite reconstruction towards unification, the current education system continues till today to be one that is ethnic stratified. According to Koh (2017), the intervention of British educational system in the colonial period has also left a significant educational legacy in post-colonial Malaysia. It was the British colonial government that established and institutionalized race-stratified education that has remained in term of form and function until today. The focus on stratification in the educational system as a resultant development of British colonial rule here is important and echoes many other observations on colonial legacies in the realm of education elsewhere (Joseph & Mathew, 2014; Law & Ice , 2013, Megahed & Lack, 2011; Sai, 2013 ). In addition, the British colonial government introduced the government scholarship program for overseas education, which is also associated to post graduate career in the civil service.

These legacies have in turn been inherited and exacerbated by the post colonial Malaysian state. Although some specifics policies and their implementations may
differ, however, the structures and systems have remained the same. After the second world war two different committees to look into multiracial education in Malaysia namely Barnes and Fenn Wu; while the Barnes Report, supported the assimilationist view, the later supported the pluralist, and both of them therefore reached different conclusion with respect to social integration. In order to compromise the difference, the government passed Education Ordinance 1952, which retained four vernacular schools, with the gradual introduction of English in Malay vernacular schools, as well as Malay and English in both of Chinese and Tamil schools.

In order to forge unity, in 1956, the Razak Report was adopted by the Malayan government as the education framework for independent Malaya. The Razak Report recommended for a national school system consisting of Malay-, English-, Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools at the primary level, and Malay- and English-medium schools at the secondary schools, with a unified national curriculum regardless of the medium of instruction. Malay-medium schools would be known as "national", while other languages schools would be known as "national-type".

According to Koh (2017), such practices have the effect of (re) producing race and committee, although as 1960 (Rahman Talib Report) called for a unified national education system. While earlier, Razak report emphasized 4 points; first formation of a single national educational system, second, Malay as the medium of instruction, third, a Malayan oriented curriculum and fourth a common system of examination (Koh, 2017). Based on the report, the educational act of 1961 was formed, Malay-Medium primary schools were renamed Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (National Primary School), while English, Chinese and Tamil primary schools were renamed Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (‘national-type schools’) . The medium of instruction was Malay in national schools and English, Chinese or Tamil in the respective national-
type schools. In order to affirm the necessity of cultural pluralism and the importance of the role of common language in forging national unity through education, it was decided to exclude vernacular secondary schools from the national system of assisted schools, which consequently left the Chinese schools to choose whether to conform with government policy or to remain as independent schools (Hashim, 2005). In 1967, the National Language Act stipulated Malay as the only national and official language of Malaysia, and Malay was made compulsory subject in all national schools. By 1968 English national type schools were gradually converted to national schools.

This system has given Malaysians more specific schooling options for those who wish to have more racially homogenous learning environment. However, many viewed it contributed to the tendency of race segregation in education which creates little chance for Malaysians to interracially interact noted by Raman and Sua (2010). As for instance, many Chinese children who were enrolled to the Chinese primary schools, would progress on to the national-type Chinese secondary schools, that are predominantly Chinese in student population, or to the independent Chinese secondary schools, and then finally would continue their tertiary education in private institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, Malay children would likely attend national primary schools and then continue their studies either in national secondary schools or special residential schools and finally pursue their tertiary education in the public universities or the government-sponsored MARA institutions. Consequently, these students, whether Chinese or Malay, have little or no experience of inter-ethnic relations during their entire schooling. (Raman & Sua, 2010, p.130).

The lack of interracial interaction in Malaysia has been voiced out earlier by Hashim (2002). She stated that only at tertiary level interracial interaction is likely to happen when prejudice about other races has developed due to the lack of direct
interaction in the previous levels of age. Hence, the racial segregation is indicated to start from the lowest level of primary education, and only when one begins his or her step at the university level, or even at workplaces, then the urgency to interact more with other races starts.

Hence, it is very challenging for students to be exposed to different cultures and ethnic groups and to develop an appreciation for diversity that is critical for unity. In addition, Malaysia education blueprint 2013-2025 notes that national and national type primary schools have become increasingly racially homogeneous. The proportion of Chinese students enrolled in SJKCs has increased from 92% in 2000 to 96% in 2011. Indian students enrolled in SJKTs have also increased from 47% to 56% of SJKT enrolment for the same period. In SKs, 97% of students are ethnically Bumiputera (Malaysia, 2013, exhibit 3-29).

This condition presents a greater challenge to the government to handle as admitted by the Prime Minister of Malaysia Najib Tun Razak (The Star 19th January 2017):

In Malaysia we live in harmony, we have tolerance. But we are still compartmentalized. It relates to something I said before about moments of unity. When Datuk Lee Chong Wei and the Olympians (were competing), we were all cheering together. Now I even see in UM, Malay students together, Chinese students together, Indian students together. But we live in harmony. It is not an ideal situation, but it is something we can live with.

On the other hand, Malaysian parents are given the option to enroll their children in private schools. Many private schools have approximately filled the gaps left by public schools. Beside some international schools have started to open their doors for local admissions as allowed by new education policy, which consequently give a huge room for parental choice for Malaysians.
According to Halstead (1994), parental choice in education is a complicated issue due to two factors. First, parents are not making a choice on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of other potentially autonomous individual (their children); and second the choices that are made impinge directly on the broader society.

Hence, choosing schools is not only driven by the willingness, interests, or needs of autonomous individuals i.e children, but also the endorsement of parents who are driven by what they see as important. As every choice made by parents gives direct or indirect impact to students and parents themselves, and to the construction of society and national building. Debates of whether vernacular schools are a hindrance to national unity or an avenue to foster unity among citizens from different races are still ongoing between politicians, legislators and educators. On the other hand, parents are given freedom to choose different stream of schools provided by the national system of education, therefore, parental choice of schools for their children, could contribute towards segregation or integration. Ramen and Sua (2010) concluded earlier that enrolment choice over what kinds of schools to attend contributed to the current state of ethnic segregation in Malaysia’s education system, which at the end would affect national unity. When national unity is not achieved through national educational system, it would be considered a failure in implementation of the National Philosophy of Education (NPE). The Malaysian NPE reads below:

“Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and the nation at large” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. ix).