THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF MALAYSIA

6.1 EARLY EDUCATION

Prior to British colonization, education was informal and limited to acquiring skills vital for survival, like fishing and farming for boys, and cookery and weaving for girls. If a student wanted to go any further, he would devote his time as an apprentice, live with a guru and learn various skills from the latter.

A more advanced type of education during that period came in the form of the pondok or hut schools and education there was based on Islamic studies. Students would study the Quran under the tutelage of a Haji or Khatib, in a hut set up by the scholar, either at his home, a surau or mosque.

Although there were in fact, Christian missionary schools which were established during the Portuguese and Dutch occupation, they did not garner much response from the Malay community, who feared that their children would be influenced by Christianity.

6.2 EDUCATION DURING BRITISH COLONIZATION

6.2.1 British Policy On Education

During the British occupation of Malaya, there was no clear policy on education. The British were contented to let the various types of schools, which were already in existence, carry on with their activities.

In following through with their divide and rule policy, the British did not intend to establish rapport between the different races in Malaya through a standardized education system.

Hence, the various vernacular schools that were present and catered to only a particular ethnic group, were run by either missionaries, rubber and coffee plantation owners, and local residents’ association.

The British felt that it was enough for each ethnic group to be educated in their own language and learn to accept their roles in life. That meant that the British were to govern, the Malays to cultivate the fields, the Chinese were to run the mining industry and businesses, while the Indians would be confined to plantations and estates. This had contributed much to preserving the status quo of the different races in Malaya and identifying them with their various economic activities.

6.2.2 Vernacular Schools

There were four types of school during British colonization. They were the English-medium, Malay-medium, Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools. Each used different mediums of instruction and provided a different syllabus.
Malay Vernacular Schools

Until 1858, Malay vernacular schools received support from the East India Company. It was only the years that followed this that Malay vernacular schools came to be monitored by the government.

In Malay vernacular schools, the curriculum was rather elementary and sufficed to meet the needs of the kampung folk. Students were taught the basic three Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition to this, other academic subjects such as Malay history and geography were taught.

Since such schools were set up particularly to ensure that the younger generation were able to provide for themselves and their future generations, living skills were definitely a must and included basket-making and other handicrafts, vegetable gardening, poultry farming and more.

Despite the fact that education was free at the time, Malay vernacular education only garnered little response from the Malay society. The benefits of such education seemed trivial to the Malays then and skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic were of little use to the village folk.

Children were also expected to help in carrying out duties at home or in the fields and this very much contributed to the low attendance rate in schools. Due to this, the British government felt compelled to implement compulsory education in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Malay Chiefs were commissioned to encourage parents to send their children to school.

Due to these efforts by the British, the number of students in Malay vernacular schools increased to 8,000 in 1909. The number of Malay vernacular schools in the Straits Settlement, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States also increased and in 1916, the number of such schools in Malaysia were as follows:

**NUMBER OF MALAY SCHOOLS IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS, FEDERATED MALAY STATES AND UNFEDERATED MALAY STATES IN 1916**

(Source: Malaysian Development Experience, Changes & Challenges, INTAN, Kuala Lumpur, 1994)

Despite the increase in the number of Malay vernacular schools in Peninsular Malaysia, it should be noted, however, that such schools were still scarce in the Unfederated Malay
States. This was because the British government paid more attention on development in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States. Consequently, the pondok schools were still a very important means of educating the younger generation in the Unfederated States.

The year 1916 was indeed a significant year in the history of Malay education and sparked off a series of new posts for Chinese and Indian education as well. The British government had established the post of Assistant Director of Education for Malay schools that year.

Three years later, there was a Chief Inspector for English schools. In 1924, the position of Assistant Director of Education for Chinese schools was created and finally in 1930, there was an Inspector for Tamil schools.

While Malay vernacular schools only provided education in the primary level, teachers' training courses were provided by the Malay College in Singapore, Malay College in Malacca, Malay College in Matang, Perak, Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim, Perak, and later in 1935, the Malay Women's Training College in Malacca.

The Sultan Idris Training College was founded in 1922. However, unlike most other teachers' training colleges then and now, this college aimed at equipping teachers with elementary gardening and agriculture skills. These teachers were then expected to ply into remote villages and educate the farmers on the latest, scientific methods in agriculture and farming.

While education was provided at the primary and teachers' training level, the British deliberately left out secondary schools for fear that the Malay community would not maintain their status quo and remain as farmers, fishermen and bullock-cart drivers.

It was enough for them that government administration positions were held by Malay princes and the sons of the elite Malays who studied in English schools the British didn’t want the Malay to receive higher education because the British wanted to make sure that the Malays were not unduly exposed to the outside world and would obediently accept their place in society.

**Education for the Chinese**
Chinese education remained very much in the hands of the Chinese community in Malaya for a very long time. Most schools were funded by various clans and run by a group of teachers, who charged students a minimum fee.

Since most of the Chinese in Malaya at the time came here to improve their economic status, genuine scholars were scarce and teachers were specially imported from China to educate the younger generation.

Not only that, even the textbooks used were written and printed in China. Hence, the syllabus in most Chinese schools in Malaya covered the history, culture and geography of
China. Quite naturally, the medium of instruction was the Chinese dialect of the clan that funded or ran the school.

Some examples of these schools include the Cantonese school at Kampong Glan in Singapore and the Hokkien school at Perkin Street. Much later, Mandarin, popularly known among the Chinese as *kuo yu*, was introduced to Chinese schools in Malaya and enabled the various groups with different dialects to communicate with each other.

When China achieved victory in its Republican Revolution of 1911, the Chinese government began focusing their attention on Chinese communities overseas, with the aim of instilling the pride of being Chinese and ensuring their loyalty. This spirit was instilled in the Chinese teachers who were convinced that revolutionary changes in China were imperative and hence, brought nationalistic literature to the Chinese communities in Malaya.

These materials were highly controversial and contained elements which criticized against foreigners. Consequently, the Chinese community had begun to resent foreign colonization.

This did not augur well with the British who were fearful that the increasing politicization of Chinese schools might disrupt the British government administration in Malaya.

Therefore, the British were forced to intervene in Chinese schools to ensure they had control over them and could curb the growing anti-foreigner sentiments among the Chinese communities.

It was due to this that the School Registration Enactment was passed in 1919 to control political activities in the school. Ten years later in 1929, the British had to go a step further by removing all xenophobic elements in Chinese texts.

The British also had to put a stop to the influx of teachers imported from China and appointed more government officials to keep an eye on the progress of Chinese schools.

Apart from all of these measures, the government introduced more teacher-training programmes and formalized Mandarin as the official medium of instruction for Chinese schools in 1935.

**Education for the Indians**

In the early 19th century, the missionaries ran formal Indian education in Malaya. This, however, did not garner much response from the Indians and was therefore not successful.

As coffee and rubber plantations began to sprout all over Malaya, the British government felt that it was the responsibility of the plantation owners to provide education for the Indian immigrants who came to work in Malaya.
As such, the British passed the Labour Ordinance in 1923 which stipulated that plantation owners in the Federated Malay States were required to provide education for the children of labourers at their own expenses.

Because there were no guidelines or provision to enforce Indian education in Malaya at the time, the Tamil schools that existed were of poor quality. Most of the teachers were either not trained, or equipped with very little training and comprised mainly Indian labour recruiters, popularly known as kangani, clerks and other estate labourers.

The mediums of instruction in Indian schools were Tamil, Thelugu, Malayalam, Punjabi or Hindi. Like the Chinese schools, Indian schools also imported school texts and learning materials from India. Hence, children in Indian schools were taught about their motherland and subjects such as history, geography and culture, which pertained to India.

This went on until the British government decided to intervene and appointed an official Inspector of Tamil schools in 1937. A new training scheme for Tamil teachers was also introduced. However, all these efforts were carried out only in primary schools, and like the Malay schools, there was no provision for secondary school education.

**English-Medium Schools**

English-medium schools that existed during British colonization were run by missionaries and the British government. English schools were the only ones that provided secondary education under the provision of the colonial government.

Students who ventured to such schools could obtain technical and trade skills. Some of them even went to the extent of pursuing the Cambridge Senior School Certificate examination.

The first English school was established by Reverend R.S. Hutchings in Penang in 1816 and known as Penang Free School. Other English missionary schools soon followed during this era, and they were the Malacca High School (1826), Singapore Free School (1834) and Victoria Institution (1893). In the early 20th century, however, these missionary schools began experiencing financial difficulties and were eventually taken over by the British government.

English schools were definitely the least popular of all the various type of schools that existed in Malaya in the late 19th and early 20th century, especially among the Malays. Most of these schools were established in the urban areas and out of reach of the rural folk, in terms of distance and school fees.

The Malay community felt that English education did not suit their religion and culture and was also afraid that the younger generation would be influenced by the Christian missionaries.

At the same time, the British did not go all out to encourage the local people of Malaya to pursue higher education in English schools.
Those that did go to such schools, however, comprised Malay princes and the sons of aristocratic families, who would eventually be employed as government clerks and lower officials in the British administration. This was done with cunning on the part of the British, to ensure that the Sultans and aristocrats felt that they were part of the government administration.

**Conclusion**

As we can see, the education system was not synchronized during British colonization and very much left to individual ethnic groups. There were different types of school that catered to a particular ethnic group, using mediums of instruction that varied with each of these ethnic groups. The differences in the various vernacular schools gave rise to a particular way of thinking or mentality in each ethnic group. It was this that presented many hurdles and obstacles in the fight to achieve unity in the plural society, which existed, and still exists in Malaya.

**6.3 EDUCATION DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

During the Japanese occupation of Malaya in the Second World War, education was used as a tool for propaganda to inculcate love and loyalty for the Japanese emperor.

The English and Mandarin languages were banned in schools. Many pondok schools and Chinese vernacular schools in Johor were closed down.

At the same time, several Malay schools in Kedah and Chinese vernacular schools in Sarawak were reopened by the Japanese and used to spread propaganda. In fact, almost all secondary schools in Kedah were used as army operation centres by the Japanese. Many school hostels were used to hold Malayan citizens detained by the Japanese army.

The Japanese language, *Nippon-Go*, became the official medium of instruction for all subjects in schools, be they Malay, Chinese or Tamil schools. The language was also taught by teachers, who in turn had to attend Japanese language courses conducted by Japanese officials once a week.

It was compulsory for students to sing the Japanese national song each morning before classes began to demonstrate their love for the Japanese emperor.

Those who served in the government were also required to have a command of the Japanese language, which was eventually used as a criterion in giving out promotions. The Japanese also established the *Shonan Korenjo Sihan Gakko*, a Japanese Language Institution in Johor, to promote patriotism towards Japan. Apart from this, the Institute for the Development of Malaya, or the *Marei Koa Kunrensho* was set up in Malacca to offer courses on the Japanese language, culture and army training.
6.4 EDUCATION AFTER WORLD WAR TWO

6.4.1 Towards A National Education System
After World War Two, the education system in Malaya was pretty much in shambles, and until Malaya achieved her independence in 1957, much had to be done to map out a new education system for the nation.

Efforts began with the introduction of a new, national education system with English as the one and only medium of instruction, but eventually, an education system was formed in which Malay became the main medium of instruction.

In 1949, a Central Advisory Committee on Education was set up to aid the government in deciding on the best form of education system, which could be implemented in Malaya, to be the catalyst in fostering national unity.

The result of this was the Holgate Report, which strongly suggested that English be used as the only medium of instruction in all schools in Malaya. The Federal Legislative Council, however, rejected this proposal.

Although things did not go as planned by the British through the Holgate report, it was evident that the British finally intended to unify the various races in Malaya, a stark contrast from their earlier policy of divide and rule. The British perceived that this could be achieved through a standardized education system with one medium of instruction.

In 1950, the Barnes Committee came out with the Barnes Report, which proposed that all primary vernacular schools maintain one single standard and become national schools using the same syllabus but bilingual languages, which were Malay and English. Secondary schools, however, had to maintain English as their mode of instruction.
One year later in 1951, there was the Fenn-Wu Report, which whole-heartedly supported the formation of a national education system, but felt that the Chinese-medium schools should be maintained. Their argument was that the country could still achieve unity although there was diversity in the medium of instruction.

It was only in 1952 that the Education Ordinance was passed, based on the Barnes Report. This did not garner good response from the Chinese and Indians, who protested the abolition of their mother tongues as one of the mediums of instruction.

Due to the failing economy and shortage of trained teachers for the national schools, however, the Education Ordinance of 1952 was not fully implemented.

Three years later in 1955, another committee was formed, this time chaired by Dato' Abdul Razak Hussein and it was given the task of reviewing the education system of Malaya.
The committee received 151 memorandums from individuals, public bodies and associations. After much deliberation, the Razak Committee proposed, one year later, the following:

- The education system should comprise two types of primary school - standard primary schools that use Malay as their medium of instruction, and standard-type primary schools that use either Kuo-Yu or Tamil or English as the medium of instruction. Both these schools, however, would rely on a common syllabus.

- Both types of primary school should enforce Malay as a compulsory subject.

- All National Secondary Schools should use a common syllabus and examination and enforce Malay and English as their compulsory subjects.

- All teachers, regardless of which school they would eventually teach at, should be trained with a common syllabus in teachers' training colleges.

In 1960, the Rahman Talib review committee was commissioned to study the Razak Report, with the aim of strengthening its implementation and emphasizing the use of Malay as the medium of instruction. The Rahman Talib Report became the basis for the Education Act 1961, which was subsequently passed by the Parliament.

### 6.4.2 Implementation of the National Education System

After the Education Act was passed and implementation of the National Education System began, it was evident that teachers needed to be trained to teach Malay, which had become the national language of Malaya.

Hence, teachers' training colleges began mushrooming throughout the country. One of them was the Language Institute, which was temporarily located in Johor in 1958 and eventually moved to Kuala Lumpur one year later.

Day Training Colleges also began to take form in the country from 1957 onwards, to meet the needs of primary schools with various mediums of instruction.

Textbooks that were used in standard-type primary schools were similar to the syllabus of those used in Standard Primary Schools. Subjects in school comprised history, culture and geography of Malaya. Gone were the days when students of a particular ethnic group studied subjects pertaining to their motherland.

In 1956, the Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka was established and given the task of providing school textbooks in Malay. It also functioned to develop the language further by publishing books and dictionaries, coming out with scientific terms and producing translated materials from other language versions.

The Progress Of The Implementation Of Malay As The Medium Of Instruction From 1957 To 1983
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Malay language was made compulsory in all government-aided primary and secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Introduction of Malay-medium classes attached to selected English-medium secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Establishment of the first Malay-medium fully-residential secondary school, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Alam Shah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>First batch of Malay-medium students graduated from the University of Malaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Malay-medium classes introduced at secondary vocational schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Conversion from English to Malay as the medium of instruction for Standard 1 to III in national-type (English) primary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>All subjects in the Arts stream, from Form 1, in national-type secondary schools were taught in Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>The conversion programme from English to Malay as the medium of instruction in all national-type (English) schools was completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>University first-year Arts courses were conducted in Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Conversion program from English to Malay as the medium of instruction in national-type (English) secondary schools was completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>All university courses in arts, science, engineering, medicine and etc, were conducted in Malay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With the National Education System, the government could use education as a tool to build the nation and foster unity through a common syllabus and curriculum. This could be further achieved with a single national language as the main medium of instruction in schools and university, and by providing teachers with a standardized form of training in teachers' training colleges.

The government also hoped that through a unified education system, the imbalances in the economic functions, which were associated with a particular ethnic group, would eventually be phased out.

To help the more backward Bumiputera students, the government awarded scholarships and provided loans to those who depicted academic potential. The government also ensured that Bumiputera students with promising academic merit were sent to residential schools in urban areas. Apart from this, a special quota system was approved to facilitate the intake of Bumiputera students into local universities.

In 1989, the National Philosophy of Education was released and is as follows:

"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 high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large."

6.4.3 Education And Vision 2020

The ultimate aim of Vision 2020 is to gain the status of "a fully developed country" for Malaysia by the year 2020. The definition of Malaysia as a fully developed country by is:

"By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient."

To achieve this fully developed country, it is essential that the nation strives to overcome these nine challenges as stated in Vision 2020:

1) The challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony, full and fair partnership, made up of one "Bangsa Malaysia" with political loyalty and dedication to the nation.
2) The challenge of creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian Society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished, robust enough to face all manner of diversity. This Malaysian Society must be distinguished by the pursuit of excellence, fully aware of all its potentials, psychologically subservient to none, and respected by people of other nations.

3) The challenge of fostering and developing a mature, democratic society, practicing a form of mature consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for many developing countries.

4) The challenge of establishing a fully moral and ethnic society, whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest of ethical standards.

5) The challenge of establishing a matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practice and profess their custom, cultures and religious beliefs, yet feeling that they belong to one nation.

6) The challenge of establishing a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward-looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future.

7) The challenge of establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system.

8) The challenge of ensuring an economically just society in which there is fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation, and there is full partnership in economic progress. Such a society cannot be in place so long as there is the identification of race with economic function, and the identification of economic backwardness with race.

9) The challenge of establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

In the history of Malaysia, it is evident that the education policy over the past years has been consistent and in line with Vision 2020. Vision 2020 emphasizes Malaysia as a fully developed country, which is developed in every aspect - economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally.

Likewise, the National Philosophy of Education calls for "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". One of the strategies used is to introduce the subjects of Islamic Studies and Moral, which are compulsory for students. Teachers are encouraged to sow moral values during lessons to gird students with positive values of tolerance, moral responsibility, concern
for the underprivileged and a sense of religion. In doing this, the government aims to overcome challenges 4, 5 and 7.

Challenge 6 will be overcome by ensuring that adequate human resources are provided in the area of science and technology. This is done through increasing the intake of Science students, encouraging the use of computers and multimedia technology in educational institutions and providing courses in Information Technology.

At school level, the government is already in the process of setting up 90 pilot Smart Schools. These schools are one of the 7 flagships of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project and aim at transforming the education system from memory-based learning into simulative thinking and creativity, through access to modern technology.

CONCLUSION

The National Education System has gone through many reviews from time to time to ensure that it will be in line with the progress and needs of our country - to restructure the society, achieve racial unity and achieve the aim of the Vision 2020, where Malaysia will not only be developed in terms of economy, science and technology by the year 2020, but also in terms of moral and ethical values.

This is clearly stated in the National Education Philosophy to produce "Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being". Citizens should also be able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society and nation at large.

The creation of Smart Schools is an example of one of the ways to realize the vision of the National Education Philosophy. Another example includes the implementation of three compulsory subjects - Malaysian Studies, Bahasa Malaysia, and Moral and Ethics - for all private institutions of higher education by the National Accreditation Board of Malaysia, beginning January 1999.