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**EDUCATIONAL POLICIES  
TOWARDS PARITY OF TREATMENT**

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EDUCATIONAL POLICIES :  
TOWARDS PARITY OF TREATMENT

by

ENG SOO PECK

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## INTRODUCTION

The present system of education with schools using different languages such as English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as a medium of instruction has its roots in the past. Therefore, current education policies and outcomes in Singapore can be better understood when viewed against past historical and political developments. In a very important sense, the profile of the educational structure today may be seen as the expression of the interplay of political and economic ideologies and realities of a small island republic. Educational policies certainly have to take cognizance of the parameters of ethnic and social class tensions as well as the geopolitical factors of a small state surrounded by two large Malay speaking nations, namely, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is this intricate interplay of the economic, political and cultural forces which shape the government's response on the one hand, and the individual citizen's response to each of the language streams on the other. There are times when these forces pull in diametrically opposite directions, making the politics of school provisions for each of the language streams an arena of conflict.

In a multi-ethnic society, the only policy which is likely to gain widespread public support is one which seeks to equalise educational opportunities among the three different ethnic groups, namely, the Chinese, Malays and Indians. Moreover, people of Chinese ethnic origin are split into two linguistic groups: those who are graduates of English medium schools and those of Mandarin medium schools. Essentially, then, there are four linguistic groups, each jealous of its own linguistic heritage and rights. To the extent that school provisions are within governmental control, equality of treatment of the four language streams is less likely to be an intractable problem given the sincerity of the intent of the government. But given the uneven development of each of the four language streams up to 1959, the year when Singapore attained self-government, the task is by no

1 The lingua franca used by the ethnic Chinese, and is similar to the language used in Taiwan and mainland China.

2 Language streams refer to schools which use the four official languages as medium of instruction. A Malay stream, for example, uses Malay as the medium of instruction.

means easy especially when limited funds have to be channelled to those areas that are likely to have an impact on economic growth, thereby denying much needed funds for one language stream or another.

Allegations of discrimination by one or the other language streams therefore appear inevitable. Obviously enough, few are likely to get very excited over educational equality unless it is tied to future occupational chances and the difference educational attainment makes between living in comfort and deprivation. It is the occupational consequences of educational attainment which are likely to contain the seeds of future disaffection among graduates of the Chinese, Tamil and Malay schools, seeing that the economy has developed in a direction which puts graduates of English schools at an advantage vis-a-vis graduates of the other language streams. Signs of incipient dissatisfaction are already evident<sup>3</sup>. This is a dilemma for both the government and the school leavers graduating from the language stream which has little or no demand in the labour market. This problem, the equalization of occupational opportunity, is not entirely within the government's control. While for political reasons, the public sector could absorb some of the non-English school graduates, the private sector's demand for labour is likely to be dominated by economic forces. The question is whether Singapore's education system with four language streams, which owes its existence to past historical events, is likely to survive in the face of strong economic forces in favour of the English language stream.

A brief historical sketch of how the educational system has evolved to what it is today will be given in the next section.

3 Peter A Busch. Legitimacy and Ethnicity (D C Heath and Company, Mass, 1974), pages 80, 85, 86 and 88.

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE

The curious existence of disparate school systems in Singapore could be traced to the long standing controversy between the Orientalists and the Westerners, the former arguing for the support and propagation of native languages and literature while the latter led by Macaulay came out strongly in support of English as the only language worthy of government support<sup>4</sup>. The vacillation of British policy in education in colonial territories may be traced to the influences of these two main competing schools of thought and had their impact on the education scene in British India and Singapore<sup>5</sup>. As the first school in Singapore did not make its appearance until 1834 when the Westerners were in the ascendancy financial support was given to English medium schools. These were either private schools or schools run by the missions which were more active, for evangelistic reasons, than the government in establishing schools. In fact, throughout the Indian period, the government of the Straits Settlements "controlled neither English or Vernacular schools and was content to subsidize a few schools"<sup>6</sup>. Only after 1890 did the government enter directly to run and manage elementary schools, and right up

- 4 Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Education: English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit or Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanskrit or Arabic; that neither as the languages of law, nor as the languages of religion, have the Sanskrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement; that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed. Quoted in Michael Edwards, *British India* (New York, Taplinger Publishing Co, 1968), p 126.
- 5 Singapore was under the control of the East India Company until 1857 when she came under the control of the Indian Office. After 1867, Singapore became a Crown Colony under the direct rule of the Colonial Office in London.
- 6 Richard Winstedt. Britain and Malaya, 1786 - 1941 (London, Green & Co, 1944), p 66.

to the Second World War there were only two government secondary schools. The missions, however, were active and many of their schools were full schools embracing both a primary and a secondary segment. Enough secondary school graduates must have been produced for the Straits Chinese Association led by Dr Lim Boon Keng to demand and obtain the consent of the British government to establish the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1916 followed by the establishment of Raffles College in 1928. These institutions developed into the future University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949 . Hence before self-government in 1959, the English schools had their full complements of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. In the context of a British Colony where English is the language of the administration, it was natural that English schools should be functional in both economic and social terms. The English educated were already entrenched in the Administration and on the attainment of self-government they assumed the reigns of power vacated by the British.

#### MALAY EDUCATION

In British Malaya and the Straits Settlement of Singapore, the Orientalist or conservative theory had the greatest impact on the education of the native masses, the British definition of "native" being confined to the Malays, the Chinese and the Tamils being regarded as a transient population not deserving of treatment on the same footing as the Malays. Government support as in English medium schools was limited to financial aid to privately established Malay schools. Up to mid-nineteenth century, poor enrolment and parental suspicion of secular Malay schools produced the inevitable pattern of schools being opened and closed down with regular monotony . British policy towards

7 Colony of Singapore, First Education Triennial Survey, 1955 - 1957 (Singapore Government Printing Office, 1959), p 9.

8 Sharom Ahmat. Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore (Singapore, Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, 1971), p 6.

Malay education assumed a firm commitment with the appointment of Blundell as Governor of Singapore in 1855, whose policy of financial support of Malay vernacular schools only to the exclusion of Chinese schools led to strong protest by the Chinese community . The continued support of Malay schools was affirmed by the appointment of A M Skinner as the first Inspector of Schools in the Straits Settlements when he established Malay language schools in 1871 on the basis of the Quran classes in order to attract more Malay enrolments<sup>10</sup> But the education provided was to achieve limited objectives only. W H Treacher, the Resident of Perak, directed District Officers to impress upon Malay pupils and parents:

"that the vernacular schools brought to their doors by a liberal government has not for its main object the manufacture of clerks, but that a lad who has gone through the school training is likely to be a better padi planter, trader, miner or sailor than one whose early years have been passed in idleness in the village lanes."

Interestingly enough, R O Winstedt, often looked upon as the modernizer of Malay education reduced the number of years spent in formal education and gave vernacular Malay education a strong manual and agricultural bias. He recommended that the Fifth Standard in Malay Schools be abolished, because it merely produced boys who thought they ought to be Malay clerks. He recommended that instruction in drawing, horticulture and at least one industry be given a central place in the

- 9 Saravanan Gopinathan. Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945 - 1973 (Singapore, Oxford Univ Press, 1974), p. 2.
- 10 T R Doraisamy. 150 Years of Education in Singapore (Singapore Teachers' Training College, 1971), p 101.
- 11 Sadka, E. The Protected Malay States, 1874 - 1895 (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1968), p 29.

syllabus. The result was that Winstedt's revised Malay education "was eminently suited to a people where the future necessarily lay in peasant agriculture. Equally, however, it had to be conceded that it fitted them for very little else"<sup>12</sup>

Two events which could have altered the course of Malay education were:

- (a) In 1951, the British Colonial Administration in Singapore proposed the Re-Orientation Plan which would equip students in Malay schools with an adequate command of English to qualify them for admission into English medium schools leading to the Senior Cambridge Certificate Examination. Both the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union and Malay community leaders opposed the Plan as aiming at the destruction of Malay traditional culture. The Plan was dropped<sup>13</sup>
- (b) The next attempt to reform Malay education came in 1956. The proposal to introduce the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English from primary six onwards was again attacked as an attempt to subvert Malay culture. Rigorous pressure by the Malay press, Utusan Melayu, and the main Malay political party, UMNO, compelled the government to drop the proposal. Malay education was allowed to maintain its status quo. This course of action was adopted "for political reasons only" as it

12 W R Roff. Origins of Malay Nationalism (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1968), p 140.

13 Saravanan Gopinathan. Op Cit, p 15.

"cannot be defended on educational grounds and is contrary to the well being of the community in general and Malays in particular"<sup>14</sup>.

These two events were to shape the development and direction of Malay education and influence the scope of opportunities both educationally and occupationally of the Malays.

Malay education was confined to elementary education right up to the year of self-government in 1959. Equipped only with an elementary education and in the Malay language it was no surprise that they should find themselves wholly unprepared to enter the competitive arena in a monetised economy both during the period of British rule and the first decade after independence.

#### CHINESE EDUCATION

The exclusion of Chinese vernacular schools under the British definition of vernacular meant that the Chinese community had to shoulder the burden of providing schools for their children in their own mother tongue (dialects)<sup>15</sup>. Chinese schools then developed free from both government support and control. Organizationally speaking, the Chinese community had the herewithal to do so as there were already in existence a variety of dialect, trade and voluntary associations which had grown up to serve the existing population and the new immigrants. These associations and Chinese philanthropists provided the educational facilities for children of the Chinese community. By 1898, only one Chinese school, run by the Roman Catholic

14 Statement by the Minister of Education, 2nd Nov 1956.

15 Dialects: the main dialects spoken in Singapore are: Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, and minor ones are Hakka, Hylam and Foochow.

mission, received grants from the government. Free from government control and guidance, the Chinese modelled their schools upon those they were familiar with - schools of mainland China, using texts and teachers that originated in China. Consequently, political upheavals in China tended to spill-over into Chinese schools in Singapore. The October 1911 revolution which saw the overthrow of the Manchus in China and the introduction of Mandarin in place of dialects as a medium of instruction in schools were forerunners of widespread reorganization of Chinese education in Singapore Chinese schools. With a lingua franca, Mandarin, Chinese schools found a new identity and developed rapidly in the first two decades of the twentieth century, possessing both a primary and a secondary segment comparable to that of the English medium schools. With political activists within the schools, the Chinese students responded to events in China by organising an anti-Japanese movement in Singapore, thereby threatening peace and order.

Political activities thrust Chinese education to the fore and the British Government, realising the danger of a school system sympathetic and loyal to a foreign government, could not ignore its existence any longer. In 1920, the Government acted by bringing in the Education Ordinance which sought to bring Chinese schools under control. Purcell observes that:

"Quite apart from the use of schools for out-and-out subversion, it was clear that the Governments could not leave uncontrolled a system of education turning out boys and girls who were to all intents and purposes members of a foreign state, owing no duty to the country they lived in and regarding it merely as an extension China."<sup>16</sup>

16 Victor Purcell. *Memoirs of a Malayan Official* (London, Cassell, 1965), p 154.

For the first time an aid-system for Chinese schools was introduced in 1923 but it came too late. The tenor and tone of the Education Ordinance of 1920 was all too clear to the Chinese community. The Ordinance empowered the Government to register all teachers, schools and managers and the right to close schools found guilty of misconduct<sup>17</sup> Purcell with his characteristic bluntness described the Ordinance as policework:

"We did not hesitate to use our powers of cancelling a teacher's certificate, withholding a grant-in-aid, or closing down a school, and even, in many cases, returning a teacher to the country of his birth."<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese community denounced the Ordinance as repressive and directed against the Chinese schools and Chinese culture. Mutual ignorance which characterised Chinese-British relationship throughout the nineteenth century was transformed into mutual suspicion and hostility. From then onwards any attempt to supervise and control Chinese schools was interpreted as attempts to destroy Chinese education and culture; suspicion of governmental intervention persists into the era after Singapore attained its self-government, which makes any reform or change in Chinese schools an especially sensitive task to the post-independent government. The anti-British feeling spilt over to embrace the English educated Chinese as well, so that distrust and suspicion between the two groups of Chinese remain a source of tension right up to the present day. Just a few years before self-government feelings ran so high that the Chinese community maintained that true nationalism was only possible if it was based on the vernacular languages and cultures. The English educated were denounced

17 T R Doraisamy, Op Cit, p 87.

18 Victor Purcell, Op Cit, p 157.

as the "running dogs of the British". Associated with this anti-English feeling was the movement to establish a Chinese university using Mandarin as the medium of instruction. In characteristic fashion, the Chinese set about to raise funds to realise their aspirations. In this atmosphere of tense nationalism based on indigenous languages, Nanyang University was born in 1956. Hence like the English medium schools, the Chinese schools too had their full complement of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.

#### TAMIL EDUCATION

Tamil education suffered even more severe handicaps than Chinese education in early Singapore. Excluded from the category of vernacular education which qualified for financial grants, the sustenance of Tamil schools devolved upon the Indian community. Not having the same organizational infra-structure as the Chinese had, the provision of Tamil schools fell upon Indian labour unions. Small and poorly staffed by unqualified teachers, the enrolment in 1947 in Tamil schools numbered a mere 919 students out of a total of 4,004 Indian students, the rest or 77 percent were in English medium schools. The first government run Tamil school made its first appearance only in 1959. In 1960, the first Tamil secondary class was established with an enrolment of 23<sup>19</sup>. It appears that the Indian community was fast to realise the irrelevance of Tamil education in the Singapore context and from an early date had preferred to send their children to English medium schools.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The short historical sketch of educational development given above provides the necessary backdrop against which to view the problems faced by the Malay segment of the population and the dilemma

19 S M Ponniah, "The Poverty of Tamil Education in Singapore, 1946 - 1966" in Instisari, Vol III, No 4, 1968 (Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd, Singapore), p 103.

faced by a locally elected government in policy decisions. Questions of inequality in educational and occupational opportunities are serious enough in a country that is racially homogeneous but when these inequalities are stratified along ethnic lines, the situation can be potentially explosive.

#### SELF-GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES TOWARDS MALAY EDUCATION

On the achievement of self-government in 1959, the government found itself confronted with four separate systems of education, each drawing its inspiration from a source outside Singapore, a hardly tenable state of affairs for a newly independent state struggling to transform it into a nation. The situation is akin to Furnivall's definition of a "plural society" which he defined as a "unit of disparate parts which owes its existence to external factors, and lacks a common social will". His elaboration of the concept of a plural society typifies the situation in 1959:

" In each section the sectional common will is feeble, and in the society as a whole there is no common social will. There may be apathy, even on such a vital point as defence against aggression. Few recognize that, in fact, all the members of all sections have material interests in common, but most see<sup>20</sup> that on many points their material interests are opposed."

20 J S Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York, New York Univ Press, 1956), p 308.

The heterogeneity of the racial and linguistic groups in Singapore is reflected in the enrolment figures in the four language streams as given in Table 1.

Table 1: Total Enrolment in Schools by Language Streams

English Schools	142,450
Chinese Schools	129,155
Malay Schools	14,213
Tamil Schools	1,399

Source: Spring Source of our Nation, 1959.

The then Minister of Education in 1959 summed up the problems facing Singapore thus:

"If the over-whelming majority of our school children were only in one type of school then much of the complexity and difficulty of formulating a unified education policy could be easily ironed out. If only the four education streams were convergent instead of being divergent then much of the anxiety, stresses and strain that confront us in the task of nation building could be dispelled ... the Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools are wholly communal ... only in English schools children find .... a common acceptance of certain values in life."<sup>21</sup>

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21 Yong, Nyuk Lin. Spring Source of Our Nation, mimeographed, 1959.

Given the situation and the nature of the problems, the educational policies which emerged in 1959 came hardly as a surprise. The almost balanced and sizeable enrolments in Chinese medium and English medium schools (where most of the students are of the Chinese ethnic group) would have made a policy which favours one or the other unacceptable. Any policy decisions which discriminate in favour of the Malays, the minority group<sup>22</sup>, which drew their strength and inspiration from Malaysia, would have aroused the bitter opposition of both the English and Chinese educated. Given the volatile situation in the fifties and early sixties when the Chinese School Old boys' associations were politically articulate, active, and heavily infiltrated by Communist cadres, a Malay biased policy could well generate racial riots. All things considered, the government's policy decision to give parity of treatment to all the language streams was calculated to defuse all the tension that had been built up in the years prior to self-government. Equality of educational opportunities for all races and linguistic groups, which in effect meant equality of resource inputs, becomes the key guiding principle in school policies. The government was at pains to stress that the main objective was to close the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" through the instrumentality of the schools, irrespective of race, language and religion. Hence there is to be no discrimination positively or negatively against any ethnic group.

22 The racial composition of Singapore's population in 1957 was as follows: Chinese, 75.4%; Malays, 13.6%; Indians, 8.6%; Others, 2.4%.

Singapore for a time between 1959 and 1965, however, pursued a policy of positive assistance to the Malays<sup>23</sup> through a number of measures:

- (a) a building programme for Malay Secondary schools,
- (b) establishing Pre-University classes for the Malays,
- (c) admitting Malay students into the University of Singapore, Nanyang University and the Singapore Polytechnic,
- (d) free education for all Malays up to tertiary level, and
- (d) establishing a system of bursaries, free textbooks and transport allowance for poor Malays.

The apparent contradiction between positive assistance to the Malays and the declared no discrimination policy can only make sense if positive assistance to the Malays is seen in the light of Singapore's desire to merge with Malaya and the very subtle argument that parity of treatment for all language streams could only be a reality if Malay education was brought up to par with all the other language streams in

23 The positive assistance to the Malays in education must be seen as part of the political move to seek merger with Malaya:

"The people of Singapore strongly desire a political merger with the Federation of Malaya. The important pre-condition for such a merger is that our own educational policy in Singapore should approximate as closely as possible, in essentials, with that of the Federation of Malaya."

view of the fact that British policy stunted the growth of Malay education at the elementary level. Moreover, Singapore by adopting Malay as the National Language which would become compulsory for all schools, and civil servants too, meant an immense boost to Malay education. Malay teachers had to be trained and as the source of teacher recruitment is the secondary school, secondary schools for Malay students had to be built. The argument was neat and the rationale apparently sound; hence incipient protests were muted.

To achieve parity of treatment, the government embarked on an ambitious school building programme, averaging 18 schools a year for five years and concentrating on the primary level to achieve government's policy of universal primary education for all. By 1967/68 the number problem was licked. Over 98 percent of primary school-going age were in school. Secondary education continued to be selective based on the primary school leaving examination, the number of pupils clearing the hurdle was clearly based on the number of places available.

Table 2 : Ratio Secondary to Primary, Adjusted & Unadjusted

YEAR	PRIMARY ENROL	PR ENROL ADJ	SEC ENROL	RATIO SEC/PR	RATIO SEC/PR ADJ
1960	285,537	188,454	59,244	.20	.31
1965	357,075	235,669	114,736	.32	.49
1970	363,518	239,921	145,740	.40	.60
1975	328,401	216,744	176,224	.53	.81
1980	296,608	195,761	170,316	.57	.87
1983	290,800	191,928	182,343	.62	.95

Adj for differential of 2 years  
(PRI = 6 yrs, SEC = 4 yrs)  
(PRI ENROL x 0.66)

Parity of treatment of the four major ethnic groups meant the provision of the right mix of schools for the four language medium, namely Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English (all with the status of official language). Compounding the problem is the policy of giving parents the right to choose the language medium school for their children. The estimates made turned out to be fairly accurate and hence parents had their wishes fulfilled. For the first time in the history of Singapore Malay and Tamil secondary schools were built to enable Malay and Tamil pupils to move into secondary schools (1962). For the first time too the government entered the Chinese school sector, mostly private prior to self-government in 1959, whilst existing Chinese schools were offered grant-in-aid (teachers' salaries, partial capital grant) in return for conforming to government regulations in terms of school curriculum, teacher certification, admission policies, etc. Thus in one stroke the government was able to make good its promise of universal primary education and parity of treatment for all ethnic groups.