Debating education for nation building in Malaysia: National school persistence or vernacular school resistance?

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Abstract

School and education system may be a critical and strategic platform for nation-building. At the same time, the politicization of the education system as well as the interdependent nature of schools and external forces may contribute to the destabilization of the role of school in nation building. In Malaysia, the issue of mono-lingualism as a medium of instruction in schools has been a contested one with efforts of accommodating bilingualism and multilingualism continue to be attempted with no solutions in sight. The persistence of vernacular schools has generated both intense debates and resistance. This article examines the reasons for the resistance to, and persistence of vernacular schools. The data were drawn from three main sources, namely interviews with heads and/or representatives of 12 schools (mostly national schools and Chinese schools) from four states namely Selangor, Kelantan, Sarawak and Sabah as part of a wider project on social cohesion study as well as newspapers and web sources. The resistance to vernacular schools was premised on the affirmation that national schools rest on the idea of inculcating and sustaining national identity as well as facilitating cross-cultural experience and communication while eliminating the more segregating and divisive forces in vernacular schools. By contrast, the persistence of vernacular schools pertains to the idea of sustaining minority cultural identity, countering the lack of national schools' sense of accommodation and questionable quality of education, and refuting the perception of vernacular schools as structural cause of disunity. Besides these negotiation difficulties of cultural identities in the school system, wider power politics and market politics interplay in influencing the resistance and persistence of vernacular schools.

Keywords: Chinese school, education, lingualism, National school, social identity, vernacular school

Introduction

Ideally Malaysians would like to believe they have a collective culture that captures the imagination of its people as one nation. However the social reality in the socio-political landscape is otherwise because the idea of modern state, the understanding of the people and the execution of the institutional process differ.

Prior to colonization, the country was led by Malay sultanate and feudal structures with distant contacts in this part of the world between the eastern Chinese frontier and western Indian and Islamic frontier. After Western colonization, the people were exposed and socialized to different sets of institutional structures. The influxes of economic migrants from China and India through the colonial economic agenda created a complex socio-political landscape with the formation of a plural society. This has led to an amalgam of structures and institutions that underpin the country's education and school system.

The current education system in Malaysia has its origins in the pre-Independence era (Ong et al., 2013). The British introduced secular education with English as the medium of instruction and later other vernacular schools, classified according to the language of instruction, were the Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools. The British colonial 'indirect' rule in 1874 through the residents' system was an interventionist move that enable the introduction of formal English education into the Malayan school system, which later became 'national schools'. The curriculum of these schools had much in common with the British schools. Emphasis was given to the acquisition of the three R's (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic) during primary school. Most of the time spent on teaching was specifically for aiding children whose mother tongue was mainly Malay, Tamil, Cantonese and Hokkien.

What was witnessed was the existence of multi-lingual school system with vernacular schools having separate medium of instruction. Besides vernacular language for the Malays, the British felt obligated to provide a basic form of education designed to teach the children of the local people to do subsistence farming and fisher. The Chinese and Indian communities established their vernacular schools with school curricula and teachers from China and India respectively. In 1913, the first Chinese school was set up in Malaya (then in Singapore). Chinese schools saw the introduction of English and Malay language in 1945 where later the accommodation of language and culture issues was settled through the Fenn-Wu Report (1951). Also the syllabus in all Chinese schools was reviewed to reflect the local context.

The characteristics of the Chinese school differ as there are two types of Chinese schools, namely vernacular Chinese school (at the primary level) and independent Chinese school (at the secondary level). In this article, reference is made to the vernacular Chinese school which follows the national curriculum. Many students in these vernacular Chinese schools, after completion of their primary education, move to national secondary schools where the medium of instruction is in Malay. This system would make the students from Chinese-medium schools trilingual and all other pupils at least bilingual (those from Tamil schools and Arabic/religious schools are also trilingual). Chinese schools would thus be integrated into the national system and yet not be abolished.

Meanwhile the scenario in national schools after independence in Peninsular Malaysia saw a shift to Malay language as the medium of instruction in the 1970s with the eventual completion of the task in 1978 (David & Govindasamy, 2005). In Malaysia, the setting up of vision schools involves placing a national school and other vernacular schools (i.e. Chinese and Tamil schools) together at the same site to share common facilities such as the school canteen and sports ground. It is hoped various races will encourage greater interaction between them and foster national unity (Mohd Izham & Jamallullail, 2010). With the exception of the English national schools and Christian missionary schools, the vernacular schools comprised mainly of pupils from a single ethnic group. However, while this is true for Tamil schools, statistics for Chinese schools show that 15% of students studying at the nearly 1,300 Chinese primary schools in the country are non-Chinese (Wong, 2014).

The identification of vernacular schools by linguistic affiliation and ethnic groups consolidated the cultural divide especially at the primary school level. This divide was further solidified by geographical location as the majority of the Malays tend to reside in rural villages, with the Chinese in urban areas, and the Indians in rural plantation areas. These diverse schools had diverse management and financial resources which comprised of government-maintained schools, missionary schools, non-profit schools, and privately funded schools (Ong et al., 2013) which further enhanced the social divide.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education mandated the use of English for teaching all Mathematics and Science subjects in order to prepare its student population for competition in an increasingly globalized market. However this bilingual policy was reversed in 2012 with both subjects now being taught in Malay language.

School and education are critical components of State agenda as they concern public interest and have become a critical and strategic platform in nation-building, of which national school is viewed as a strategic educational tool (Azly Rahman, 2013). However historical and political attempts to consolidate all schools under a single stream national school have failed even in the postcolonial era. Even prior to independence the intent in establishing national schools has encountered resistance from the Chinese fraternity. On the opposing front, the resistance to vernacular schools has also gained momentum. The

issue of mono-lingualism as a medium of instruction in national schools has been a contested one. Attempts to accommodate bilingualism and multilingualism are ongoing in Malaysia with no solutions in sight. However, two key personalities - one an educationist (UiTM pro-chancellor Abdul Rahman Arshad) in 2012 and another a politician (Cheras Umno chief Syed Ali Alhabshee) in 2014 have urged the government to look into setting up a single-stream school system to overcome the barrier towards racial unity posed by the multi-stream. The most recent call for the abolition of vernacular schools was the '*Hapuskan SJKC*' [Get rid of SJKC] banners displayed during the Malaysia Day 16 September 2015 rally by the 'Red Shirts', dubbed 'the#Merah169' (Malay Mail Online, 2015).

Why is there resistance to vernacular schools when it is perceived to be performing well? Why hasn't the national school been popular among the minorities? Why did the vernacular school persist? Why the resistance to national school implementation?

The objective of this article is to examine the reasons for the resistance to and persistence of vernacular school. The data were drawn from three main sources, namely interviews with 12 schools (mostly national schools and Chinese schools), heads and/or representatives from four states namely Selangor, Kelantan, Sarawak and Sabah as part of a wider project on social cohesion study (see acknowledgement) as well as newspapers and web sources.

Literature review

There are two sources for the literature review namely theoretical and empirical sources related to the question of language and identity in schools, with particular reference to the issue of persistence and resistance to vernacular school.

Theories on language and identity-politics

There are two strands of theory with regard to the debate on language as medium of instruction in national schools and vernacular schools. These theories explain the relationship between language and identity through social identity theory and postcolonial theory.

The social identity theory is premised on the socio-psychological approach which assumes a direct relationship between language and ethnic identity where language contact is seen as an outcome through group membership. Tajfel's famous social identity theory contends that groups are formed on the bases of self-definition, attraction, and cultural participation (Bagby & Rector, 1992). Giles and Byrne (1982) proposed a theory of ethnolinguistic identity where ethnolinguistic vitality provides a subjective feeling of belonging to a particular group (in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). This theory suggests language as a salient marker of ethnic identity and group membership (in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). There are two ways of viewing this relationship between language and group membership and identity. If the mother tongue language and ethnic identity of the minority group are strong, it suggests a strong in-group identification, in-group vitality high, in-group boundaries are closed and identification with other groups weak and low likelihood to assimilate and learn the second language. Opposing characteristics are observed if the in-group identification is weak.

Meanwhile the post-structural and related postcolonial critical approaches view identity as multidimensional, contingent and subject to negotiation across context (Doran, 2004). Here language is used as a key for strategic enactment of subject positions projecting particular aspects of their social identities and downplaying others in particular settings. Language ideologies, ethnic and national identities are linked to relations of power and political arrangement in communities and societies (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Language choices in multilingual contexts are assumed to be embedded in larger social, political, economic and cultural systems. Bourdieu (1991) views linguistic practices as a form of symbolic capital convertible into economic and social capital and distributed unequally within any speech community especially in terms of linguistic stratification (in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Postcolonial theory extends this post-structural view by contesting and rejecting meta-narratives of universal ideas of modern education, nation state, homogenous identity, and universalizing tendencies. These tendencies are often carried over by postcolonial states that are perceived as neocolonial states because of the hegemonic nature of their actions. Their actions, instead of being inclusive, rely primarily or continue on a platform set by their past experiences with colonials. As such the postcolonial states are seen to become neocolonial masters often with hegemonic discourse, showing limitation of outlook by its inability to empathize across boundaries of culture and ethnic differences. The representation of others (e.g. minorities) as 'them' (other cultures) from the powerful majority shows a way of achieving this limited end.

Postcolonial theory shows how a particular system (e.g. school system) is silent on matters related to politics of education. Postcolonial theory tries to foreground question of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in school, for example spaces for multilingualism. Postcolonial theory celebrates hybridity and cultural polyvalency. For example Homi Babha's (1994) idea of third space for understanding the dynamics of identity negotiation in minority communities entails creating an in-between space of culture where hybrid identities transgress fixed identities of traditional order. Postcolonial approach sees states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'otherness' as sources of energy and potential for change.

Past empirical studies

The issue of resistance to vernacular school and its persistence can be framed by examining the counter context whether monolingualism or bilingualism or multilingualism should be promoted in national school system. The notion of lingualism means the modes of language instruction used in the school system as means for teaching and learning process. The prevalent discourse is between the need for bilingualism and multilingualism. Monolingualism suggests a single-stream medium of language instruction in a school and promotes the idea of single cultural foundation for nation-building process. Bilingualism rests on arguments to accommodate globalization, internationalization, industrialization, and solidarity, and while multilingualism premised on linguistic and cultural diversity in schools has the potential to enlighten and expand our understanding of others, access to ease of learning at early stage, and thinking in mother tongue to sustain cultural identity.

Lai and Byram (2003) explore the politics of bilingualism in Hong Kong with the shift from English to Chinese (e.g. Mandarin) as medium of instruction in schools. The language shift policy was problematic for Hong Kong as it has to go through the decolonization process since 1997 and internationalization of English under globalized developments witnessed in ICT. Some of the problems are associated with hegemonic struggle of social groups in the society such as the indigenous elite class and national ruling elites at both the local and national level.

Tupas and Lorente (2011) examined the Philippines experience where there were three phases of language use in schools from monolingualism to bilingualism to multilingualism. Since 1901 the public education system in Philippines established by the Americans saw English as the sole medium of instruction. However, since 1974 the *Bilingual Education Program of the Philippines* (BEP) was introduced with English as the medium of instruction in science and mathematics and Filipino, the national language, in all other subjects. The bilingual approach saw Filipino as the national language can smoothen the learning among Filipinos and express their identity as a nation (Smolicz & Nical, 1997) while English played the role as a global language. Since 2009, the BEP was replaced by the implementation of *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* (MTBMLE) at primary school level to encourage mother tongue acquisition. This action was seen as progressive in accommodating the needs of the varying indigenous communities in gaining access to primary education, who were displaced by the bilingual stream.

In contrast, pessimism prevails in South Africa to bring on board the mother tongue education as an additive bilingualism policy. Banda (2000) sees this policy as facing obstacles when the utility of vernacular languages is perceived as lesser to English by key actors such as role models, learners and

parents. In a somewhat similar fashion, Gupta (1997) has argued against vernacular schools namely problems encountered by children in multilingual settings, and the potential for mother tongue education to be socially and ethnically divisive as well as marginal groups diminish access to power structures.

De Klerk (2002) posits the discourse on multilingualism or linguistic diversity rests on the concerns for human rights as well as cultural and linguistic sustenance of minority groups. This approach positions the role of mother-tongue education as a key political and linguistic tool in the empowerment of marginal communities such as minorities. Mother tongue of minorities is viewed as a basic human right and its growth is viewed as progressive in countering hegemony of majority languages in terms of injustices and inequalities (De Klerk, 2002).

Stroud (2003) viewed multilingualism education through vernacular and local languages have both the negative and positive effect of globalization. Multilingualism can reinforce the negative effect of globalization by marginalizing these languages as witnessed in case of Malay language sidelined in the predominantly English preferred market place. Multilingualism can also counteract the negative effects of globalization by promoting the mother tongue and other local languages.

Debate

We will frame this debate along two lines, firstly, arguing for the resistance to vernacular school, which inevitably comprises the affirmation and support for the national school, and secondly, arguing for the persistence of vernacular school, which will inevitably comprise resistance to its counterpart national school.

Arguments for the resistance to vernacular schools

Arguments for the resistance to vernacular schools mainly premised on the claim and affirmation for the support of the national schools. It rests on the idea of inculcating and sustaining national identity as well as facilitating cross-cultural experience and communication through national school, and eliminating segregative and divisive forces in vernacular school.

1) National identity through national schools and not vernacular schools

The cause of national schools for nation building purposes is without doubt an avenue for the State to shape the society with positive values and perspectives celebrating the nation's diverse community make up. As such, the national school can be a microcosm reflective of the Malaysian society. This ideal if properly cultivated will provide a collective view of a sense of belonging, trust and shared destiny. In the Malaysian case, the common and popular ideal is the promotion of the idea of single language stream (monolingualism) with Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) as the medium of instruction in the national school but there were also options for bilingualism as in the case of teaching of Maths and Sciences in English in 2003. The assumption of the mono-lingual strand is that as a Malaysian, one should be in a Malay-medium national school as their national language is Malay. The second bilingual strand is somewhat accommodative of English as a market and global language of which the nation's position matters.

Thus the main resistance to vernacular schools was based on this ideal of nation building and formation of national identity. As a consequence, the State's intent and interest has always been to ensure that the diverse minority population favouring vernacular schools embrace a national school curriculum with the national language as a platform for national culture – with the slogan "*bahasa membentuk jiwa bangsa*" which literally means "language forms the soul of the nation." From this angle vernacular school with its mother tongue or minority language as medium of instruction contradicts the national aspiration.

2) Cross-cultural experience and communication in national cultural foundations

Nations' cultural foundations and values are reinforced in national schools and this serves as a platform to grapple with the idea of a racially and culturally diverse Malaysian society. Thus by creating a Malaysian fabric in the national school, it will facilitate cross-cultural experience that will influence beliefs and behaviour of students and eventually develop skills to engage in communication. Thus, the opportunity to interact with wider sections of the community with different languages and different ethnic groups were enlarged through the national school platform. Here the vernacular schools were perceived to be limited in view of the lack of a common national language to play a facilitating role, besides lack of opportunity for cross-cultural experience with a wider mix of ethnic groups. It was envisaged that if there are greater number of vernacular schools present, then there is also less possibility for greater mix of ethnic groups in national schools.

3) Vernacular school as segregative and divisive obstacle to unity

From the idea of schools as a reinforcing agent of values and perspective, vernacular school with its parochial mother tongue language as medium of instruction and ethnically preference groups were perceived to be segregative in nature as partial values of a minority group is projected and not the national aspiration. Besides that, the lack of opportunities for students to interact with the wider mix of people acts as an obstacle to unity. This is more so a problem if the students come from a segregated living environment and end up in a segregated vernacular school which could be counterproductive to the unity aspiration if these students were to continue until the secondary level.

Arguments for the persistence of vernacular schools

Several arguments for the persistence of vernacular schools have been put forward by the Chinese stakeholders namely sustaining cultural identity, lack of accommodation in national schools and questionable quality of education in national school. Besides the perennial social identity concerns associated with Chinese schools, the interdependence between the factors was seen where the persistence of Chinese schools is partly due to the governance and politics of education and lack of faith in the national schools which are viewed as less inclusive and lacking in quality of education.

1) Sustaining minority language to sustain minority culture and identity

One of the key arguments for the persistence of vernacular schools is in sustaining minorities' culture, especially in the Malaysian case, the sustenance of Chinese and Indian culture. The identity of minorities in terms of their mother tongue is very much dependent or rooted in the medium of instruction of the vernacular school. Also certain subjects that create cultural awareness such as literature, history and ethics are all embedded in this vernacular stream. This argument can be traced back to the formation of the education act prior to Malaya's independence where the Fenn-Wu report (1951) found that the Chinese leaders were concerned about the abolition of Chinese schools and its possible consequences on the erosion and eventual eradication of their culture after the policy formulation. Besides the cultural roots and needs thesis, mother tongue education is also perceived as both an individual and social rights concerns. In short the survival of the minority culture and identity has been squarely placed on the role of vernacular schools to impart cultural education and identity. However the presence of non-Chinese students in Chinese schools can be viewed from a favourable view of embracing different language skills for the market as well as for future prospects in global business. The non-Chinese seeking purposeful education in Chinese vernacular schools will not witness erosion of their cultural identity and would not become more 'Chinese', as the wider landscape is multicultural in nature.

2) Lack of accommodation of minorities' mother tongue education in the national school

Critics argue that if the national schools have been more forthcoming in accommodating the main minority languages, it would have been easier to form a more inclusive education under one roof (i.e. national school) instead of a separate roof (i.e. vernacular school). Suspicion and lack of faith in the State's effort in incorporating multilingual and multicultural education in the national school system has been a key factor for the persistence of vernacular schools.

   This lack of faith was reflected by a headmaster from a primary school in Sarawak who opined that the "Chinese society is against the idea of integration school like the *sekolah wawasan* [vision school]. Why? Because they are scared that they'll lose the identity of Chinese schools. When under *sekolah wawasan* [vision school], the Chinese school will become merged with other schools."

   The Chinese are against Vision school (as means of cultivating integration aka inclusive national school) because of several reasons:

   a. Suspicious of the perceived 'Islamic consciousness agenda' underway in national schools. This agenda was reflected in national schools where non-Islamic students were forced to wear *baju kurung* (Malay costume perceived to be Islamic) and often enticed to chant or listened to Islamic prayers at assembly and during recess.
   b. Chinese community will lose their identity of Chinese school. Losing their language is like "losing their cultural backbone"
   c. Under vision school (aka national school), Chinese schools might become a mere source of offering only Chinese subject e.g. Mandarin language without offering other cultural component.
   d. Chinese schools currently offer jobs to various segments of the Chinese educated class. This economic opportunity will close the door for language and cultural enthusiasts.

3) Perceived higher quality and market advantage in vernacular school education

Some argue that the persistence of vernacular schools seen from the increasing demand for vernacular schools as not for the reason of language alone but quality issue. The Chinese school system imparts extra quality issue through discipline, values and performance which are sought after by parents. The demand for these schools is getting higher because it is seen as an alternative to the national schools. Abolishing vernacular schools will not solve the problem as it will only force a higher demand for alternative private schools. Thus the issue of quality becomes the concern of parents and stakeholders at large.

4) Perceived lower quality of national schools is the politics of the persistence of vernacular schools

A common perception amongst the Chinese educators as well as comments from newspaper readers and internet sites is that the national school has compromised on the quality of education. Three signs that indicate the quality of national schools has declined were, firstly, when the government by its own admission enacted and introduced the policy of teaching maths and science in English in 2003; secondly, when Malays (considered to be nationalists) begin to send their children to Chinese schools; and thirdly, it can be attributed to the lowering of the passing mark to enable students to secure grades in multiple A's which has been a phenomena of late. A related point to this third sign is that when these same students sit for higher level exams such as foreign GCE 'A' levels, they struggle to pass with ease.

5) Counterpoints to the role of vernacular schools in not promoting racial or national integration

Beyond school environment or other external factors, responses from the Chinese school stakeholders argue that ethnic integration issue is externalized and not due to vernacular schools per se. One school board member cites as follows:

"If we want racial harmony/integration, it is not because we are in Chinese/Tamil schools and we become extremists. But it is a matter of how our government provides opportunities for higher education and employment. These are the things that make the people racialist. Not because of the schools. If government is fair in higher education and employment opportunities, then they will achieve more national unity".

Besides school environment and government policy, some argue that educators, community and media play a role in inculcating national integration. Others point out that segregative school environments exist in other social spaces such as independent and private schools, religious schools, mono-ethnic residential schools, mono-ethnic MARA junior colleges and even universities (such as UiTM). They question why there were no calls to abolish these institutions. They also question whether there are more to national integration than social environment alone.

Also some argue that vernacular schools such as Chinese schools were already multi-racial school. This point was put forward in view of the common sight to see non-Chinese namely Malay and other natives' (in Sabah and Sarawak) parents sending their children to Mandarin medium schools. Besides that a mainstream ruling component party member went on to say the following: "Non-Chinese students studying at Chinese primary schools throughout the country now comprise 12% of the total number of students. This means that SJK(C) schools are now more diverse than national schools" (Malaysian Insider, 2014)**.** Lack of access to classified data makes it difficult to validate this statement. In fact in one rural school in Kelantan, the Chinese school is sustaining mainly because of the presence of majority of Malay students, as the outmigration of Chinese community to urban areas have reduced their children's presence. In some rural communities, the proximity of a Chinese school makes it a practical choice for Malay students. However the scale of multi-racial composition in Chinese school on average is low. In fact a columnist even question whether a non-Chinese "because they speak Chinese [by virtue of attending Chinese vernacular school], they are segregated from their ethnic cousins and other Malaysians who learn in Malay" in national schools (**W**ong Chin Huat, 2014)**.**

There were several reasons for non-Chinese to send their children to Chinese schools; the discipline and quality of education, learning Mandarin as a third language for market needs, non-Muslim natives (i.e. in East Malaysia) fearing the Islamization in national schools and convenient location of vernacular school.

Discussion and conclusion

The idea of national school education based on English language during the colonial and early part of the post-independence period, followed by the shift to Malay language in 1978 and vernacular schools using the mother tongue for their respective communities have shaped the educational landscape in Malaysia. Traces of colonial agenda in education revolve around two areas namely regulating or constructing order in socio-cultural sphere and facilitating wider interests in economic resource exploitation. By implication, the continuity of representation and practices of education in post-colonial period can be traced to colonial modes of rationality.

As can be seen in this debate on the resistance to vernacular schools, the emphasis on the affirmative position of those who support the national schools and simultaneously resist the vernacular schools was that they appear to emphasize the goals desired i.e. inclined towards the resolution of the outcome. Their position is that national schools cohere with the goals of national identity and there is no compromise in their standpoint. There might be problems in the mechanism, for example lower quality of education or hindrance to socialization, but these process elements are viewed as negotiable and solvable over time.

From a theoretical standpoint, the social identity theory partially explains the persistence of vernacular schools. Since the mother tongue language and ethnic identity of the minority group are strong, it suggests strong in-group identification and less likelihood to assimilate and learn the second language. This was further reinforced by problems of quality of education and lack of inclusivity of other cultures

and languages in national school. An interesting point is that the national school project to use Malay language as mode of instruction was prompted by the same social identity logic that is to inculcate national identity where a new in-group identification and socialization is facilitated.

However social identity theory's relevance stops there and was unable to capture the dynamics of the social reality, especially negotiation of cultural identities in the school system, where wider power politics and market politics interplay in influencing the resistance and persistence of vernacular schools. There are three possible scenarios in the Malaysian context where the language policy in the education system has evolved: emulate the colonial mould to suit the power interest (neo-colonial continuity), resist the colonial mould and come up with a local mould and formulate a hybrid mould. Using the postcolonial lenses one can see that the ideological forces that had pushed the colonized Malaysia to internalize the colonizers values and norms especially among the elites. This was reinforced by the nation state formation, schooling and planning system as well as the duplication of the administrative structures and the market modernization and industrial process that comes with it. At the same time the postcolonial regimes were also resisting the colonial ideologies by formulating their own structures most of which they were emulating the colonial masters as most of them were educated in the Anglo-Saxon English education system or models. Reasons for the justification and legitimation of Islamic education and subsequently incorporation of the religious fervor in the national school can be traced to the colonial missionary education where religious education was promoted. While this process was taking place in the national school, the persistence of the vernacular school was consolidated with improved performance in the quality of education. This process somewhat reinforced the multilingual and ethno linguistic affiliation, though some pragmatic cross-cultural practices were in place for market reasons. The value of a particular language variety in a symbolic market place such as national school is derived from the legitimization by dominant group and dominant institutions.

In the Malaysian case, bilingualism and multilingualism should not be a problem if one were to consider the diverse ethnic composition of its population. However there is a fragmented approach to the acquisition of second and third languages with the presence of vernacular schools (i.e. medium of language instruction are in Mandarin and Tamil) and religious schools (i.e. Arabic) which are predominantly aligned along ethnic groups, and form an important part of the Malaysian historical roots. Though these schools provide rich language resource but they are not accessible to the wider population.

Acknowledgement

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