



## **Impact of Chinese Vernacular Medium of Instruction on Unity in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multilingual nation. In order to meet this diversity, Malaysia has developed an educational system with different languages as the medium of instruction (MOI). From the Razak Report to the Rahman Talib Report and the 1961 Education Act, Malay or Bahasa Melayu (BM) has been instituted as the national language and the MOI in national schools, with the aim of promoting nation unity. However, in the case of the Chinese vernacular schools, Mandarin is the MOI. Such a difference in MOI for the two different school systems has allowed educationists and non-educationists alike to fault the Chinese vernacular schools as an obstacle to racial unity. How valid and reliable is this accusation? In contrast, Chinese educationists feel it is of utmost importance to preserve their mother tongue (Mandarin) based education. Therefore, this paper will unravel how Chinese medium schools impact on unity or the lack of it among the students via interviews and a questionnaire adapted from Fazilah, Noraziah, Zaharah, Mansor, and Azizah (2009). The findings have revealed that the students' ethnicity and national identity are best portrayed by Mandarin because of its strong association with their Chinese roots. In addition, Mandarin is also the students' language of choice both inside and outside the classroom, which seems to suggest the absence of a sense of unity among them.

*Keywords:* Chinese vernacular schools, mother tongue education, medium of instruction, unity, language policy

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysian schools, since pre-colonial period, have adopted different mediums of instruction (MOI) to accommodate the multiethnic communities comprising three major ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese and

Indians. Hence, the Malaysian education system today is made up of three different MOI's at the primary level based on the platform of multilingualism with equal treatment for the three major ethnic groups of the country. At the secondary level, Malay (Bahasa Melayu-BM) is the only official MOI. However, the Chinese community has another option – 'outside' the national education system to pursue their secondary education. They can go to Chinese independent schools, which are not sanctioned by the government but are still legitimate (Chong & Norsimah, 2007) as they are officially monitored by United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia. These schools<sup>1</sup> adopt their mother-tongue<sup>2</sup> as the MOI.

Given the existence of the different types of schools in Malaysia, this paper examines whether the MOI that is used in Chinese vernacular schools has been

beneficial or detrimental to national unity because vernacular medium schools have been criticized as one of the causes for disunity (Mior Khairul Azrin, 2011; Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 2011).

To achieve this purpose, the language practice of Chinese medium school students is examined. Hence the research questions of this study are:

1. How do students portray ethnicity and national identity via the usage of language?
2. Which language do students adopt in their interactions?
3. Which language has the greatest impact on national integration?

However, before this can be carried out, a brief historical background that led to the development of Chinese education in Malaysia has to be discussed.

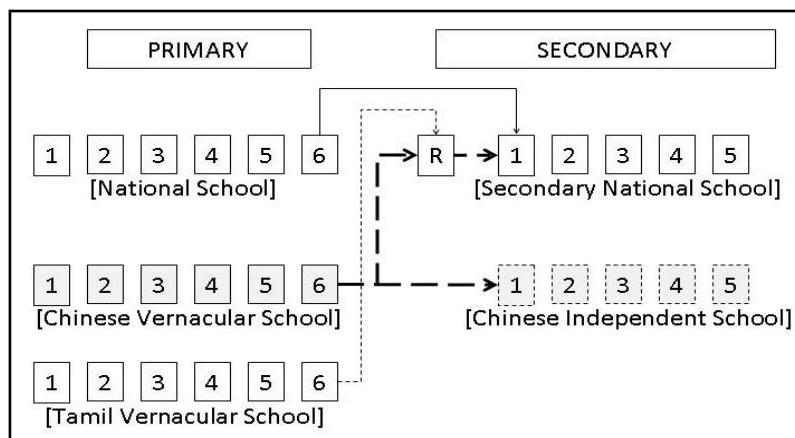


Fig. 1: The Malaysian Education System  
(Source: Adapted from World Data on Education, 2006)

## HISTORY OF CHINESE EDUCATION

The Chinese schools in Malaysia today are a result of the great efforts made by the Chinese community since the early 1800s. Their development can be traced from two different phases; British colonization and post-independence Malaysia.

Under the British colonial government, the Chinese were given the freedom to develop their own educational system because they were seen as birds of passage who would return to their country of origin after they had accumulated sufficient wealth (Gill, 2007). Once independence was achieved, the language policies in Malaysia focused on the development of BM because of the need for establishing a national identity, which was vital since “the language of a nation or an ethnic group is often a symbol of its identity and allegiance, and an embodiment of its values, culture and traditions” (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004, p. 2). Following the realization of how significant a national language was to a country, legislations were introduced and acts were enacted to ensure uniformity in official purposes in education as well as for creating unity. The Razak Report, Rahman Talib Report, and Article 152 of the Federal Constitution had distinctly made provisions for the languages of non-Malaysians.

The Razak Report (as cited in Kua, 1999) stated that,

*... the ultimate objective of education policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a*

*national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction... a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy the needs to promote their culture, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention of making Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country (p. 62).*

Although the intention of the Razak Report was an endorsement for national unity, Yang (Chong & Norsimah, 2007) perceived it as of dual purposes. On the one hand, it was in-line with mono-ethnic culturalism because BM which is the language of Malays was implemented in many government educational acts such as the Education Act of 1996, despite the various school systems (Thock, 2009). On the other hand, the report accepted a proposal for a national education policy based on multiculturalism because of the need to preserve and sustain the growth of languages and cultures of other ethnic groups.

However, the dual purposes of the Razak Report were seen as an obstacle by the Rahman Talib committee, which recommended the elimination of communal secondary schools for the sake of national unity. They felt that “it is impossible,

within the framework of a policy which is truly national, to satisfy completely all the individual demands of each cultural and language group in the country” (Rahman Talib Report, as cited in Tan, 2009). Consequently, BM has become the main MOI for all types of national secondary schools at the expense of mother tongue education.

To further uphold BM, Article 152 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution states that BM is the national language but the citizen is free to learn and use other languages, except for official purposes, that is, any purpose with regard to the Government, Federal or State, and of a public authority.

Undeterred by the policies enacted, the Chinese community fought continuously for Chinese medium schools which led to an upsurge in enrolment in Chinese vernacular schools after 1969 (Kua, 1999). However, the Chinese were still doubtful about the various acts, particularly the 1996 Education Act which Yang (as cited in Gill, 2007, p. 114) says, “does not guarantee the permanent or continued use of mother tongue as the main medium of instruction in the existing Chinese vernacular primary schools”. Despite these challenges, there are approximately 1291 Chinese primary

schools (Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan [EPRD], 2010) and 61 Chinese Independent schools (United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia, 2010) currently, as shown in Table 1 below. The relatively large number of Chinese schools compared to the national schools reveals that the Chinese resolve to keep the teaching of Mandarin relevant although the government has no intention of building new Chinese primary schools, as stated by the Minister of Education in 1999, Najib Tun Razak (Sin Chew Daily, as cited in Thock, 2009).

#### **ISSUES FACING CHINESE VERNACULAR SCHOOLS**

The dilemma of utilising language policies in guaranteeing vernacular education and the need for national integration is a constant challenge in a multi-ethnic country. To investigate whether Chinese vernacular schools MOI contribute to national unity, this section will examine three pertinent issues, namely: i) the voices for and against Chinese medium schools; ii) the loyalty of the Chinese community, and; iii) the proposal for the establishment of a single education system arising from the 1Malaysia concept.

TABLE 1  
The Number of National and Chinese Medium Schools in Malaysia

Types of Schools	Total
Chinese Vernacular schools (Primary)	1291
National schools (Primary)	5881
Secondary National schools <sup>3</sup>	1887
Chinese Independent schools	61

(Source: EPRD, 2010 & United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia, 2010, as of 30th June 2010)

There has been a strong view from some Malaysians, as reflected in the letters to the editors of mainstream newspapers, that the lack of Chinese students in national schools was because of the more favourable Chinese education and a growing number of vernacular schools which have adopted mother-tongue education. They were of the opinion that the use of Mandarin to teach all the subjects, except BM and English languages, in the vernacular school system works against the promotion of the national language. The fight to uphold BM can also be seen in the PPSMI<sup>4</sup> case, where the main reason of its abolishment is because it contradicts with Article 152 of the Federal Constitution (Mior Khairul Azrin, 2011). These factors are deemed to have further hindered the Malaysian school systems in forging unity among its different races, as suggested by Norhashimah Jalaluddin (2011), President of the Malaysian Linguistic Society, when she raised the question of who is deemed more patriotic - citizens who wish for their own national language to be the MOI or the citizens who reject their country's national language. She further reminds the public that BM, as the national language, is the essence and soul of the national identity (Norhashimah Jalaluddin, 2011). Likewise, Khoo Kay Kim, an eminent scholar in education, is not in favour of the vernacular school system, too (Prof Khoo Kay Kim, 2009). He says:

*Our education system must be restructured, to include the creation of single stream school to ensure the achievement of 1Malaysia.*

*The citizens have been segregated according to one's own stream and mother tongue since young, so when they grow up, it will be difficult for them to work together and achieve mutual understanding.*

In contrast, Khoo Kay Peng (as cited in Gill, 2007), Executive Director of Sedar Institute, the think-tank of Gerakan, one of the multi-racial political parties in Malaysia, argues that children through their strong literacy skills access knowledge and information better in their mother-tongue. Similarly, Yoong (2010) states unequivocally that,

*Whether done through parental choice or otherwise, forcing a child to accept instruction through a dominant language of instruction that is different from the mother tongue (either the dominant national language or an international language) is tantamount to immersion or submersion education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim (p. 4).*

These two differing views are described by Schmidt (as cited in Gill, 2007, p. 119) as the “advocates for minority language equality ... (who) speak in the language of justice, while proponents of national unity speak in terms of national good,” result in

one of the most challenging complexities of language policy conflict, which is “its partisans often appear to be speaking past each other — participating in parallel discourse — rather than to each other, seemingly motivated by differing concerns”. It is also seen as a struggle between the “warriors” of the national language, made up of politicians and advocators (Asmah Haji Omar, as cited in Chong & Norsimah, 2007) and the *hua jiao dou shi* (fighters of Chinese education) involving the defenders of mother tongue education system (Chong & Norsimah, 2007). The education system in Malaysia, summarized in the diagram below, is a reflection of Schmidt’s statement. Undeniably, the existence of two types of schools has led to the complexity of language policy depicted in the boxes on the right where on the one hand, BM is deemed as the tool to develop national identity by the proponents of national unity; hence, disregarding Chinese vernacular MOI due to the limited usage of BM in those schools. But the advocates for minority language see BM as another compulsory subject with little impact on national unity.

Besides the criticism made towards the vernacular school system, the status of the national language was raised in Malaysian mainstream media, which questioned the loyalty of Malaysian Chinese (Elias, 2008). The debate started when Toh (2010) commented that not being well-versed in BM would not make him less patriotic. Some agreed, for instance Chan (2010) who claimed to be comfortable speaking English and saw no reason for putting pride in culture and languages. However, Arbee (2010) believes that BM should be given the recognition befitting its status by all who professed to be citizens of this country. His view was echoed by Prime Minister Najib Tun Abdul Razak, who reminded Malaysians of the importance of speaking good BM as it is our identity at the inaugural 1Malaysia National Teachers Assembly (“*Help student learn,*” 2010).

Coupled with the above challenge is the 1Malaysia concept proposed by the current Prime Minister, who has promoted it as the essence of unity in diversity. He said that the key to achieving unity is the celebration of our diversity and his formula to accomplish

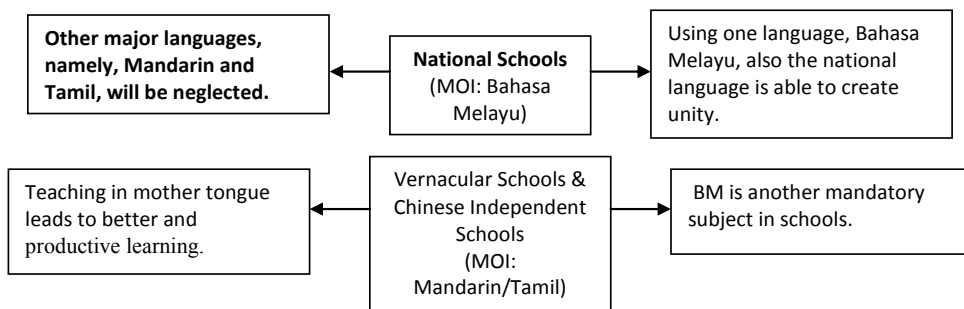


Fig.2: Two differing language policy views in Malaysia

it is: Unity = Diversity + Inclusiveness (Kee, 2010). However, the equation is open to huge intangible possibilities and to avoid Malaysia ending up just like other slogans that came before it, Kee suggested that:

*... it could set a goal to build racial unity, complete with an action plan with detailed measures that would bring the different races together to learn about one another so they can accept their differences. It could entail – I'm merely quoting possibilities – the creation of a single-stream education system, even a reform of the entire education system in order to depoliticise it; the complete removal of the category of "race" in all forms, official and otherwise... the organising of projects to educate the masses on the celebration of diversity. Whatever fits the principles of acceptance and diversity.*

Kee's proposal of having a single-stream school<sup>5</sup> system in building a united nation is considerable. It implies that mother-tongue education system in general plays a part in racial segregation.

In order to identify whether Chinese medium schools are the cause of segregation and whether a single-stream education system will ensure unity, it is important to unravel the current situation of propagating unity in the Chinese school system.

## METHODOLOGY

Unlike most people in Hong Kong, who are of Chinese descent, resisting mother-tongue education and preferring English, which is seen as the language of international commerce (Tsui, 2004), and Singaporeans who supported bilingualism due to investments of many multinational corporations (MNCs) in the 70s (Pakir, 2004), Chinese in Malaysia uphold Chinese-medium education intensely. It is so intense that opponents of Chinese medium education have attributed it as an obstacle to national unity. Therefore, to determine whether the usage of MOI in Chinese medium schools poses a threat to national integration, a questionnaire survey adapted from Fazilah *et al.* (2009) (see Appendix A) was used because the questionnaire dealt with the impact of language and social cohesion in determining national identity, where three most relevant aspects were investigated; a) the portrayal of ethnicity and national identity via the usage of language; b) the choice of language and its functions; and c) the extent of language influences on the integration and segregation of a community. These aspects were scrutinized because they intertwine with national unity and that language plays a pivotal role in providing a country the means of developing a national identity and "socio-cultural authenticity" (Gill, forthcoming).

In this current study, the objective is to determine whether the MOI used in vernacular schools and the students' attitudes in relation to the former result in unity or segregation in Malaysia. The

Chinese school responses to unity were analyzed based on the three categories parallel with the research questions namely: 1) students' perception of the usage of certain languages which depict either ethnicity or national identity; 2) their chosen language and its function inside and outside

of school; 3) along with their perception on which language has the greatest impact on national integration. Some of the questions asked according to the sections were shown in Fig.3 to Fig.5 (the complete questionnaire is found in Appendix B).

<i>Bahasa Melayu patut diselaraskan dan diwajibkan penggunaannya di mana sahaja supaya ia dapat menjadi identiti kebangsaan.</i> (The Malay language should be standardized and its usage must be made compulsory so that it will be the national identity)
<i>Saya mengiktiraf bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa rasmi.</i> (I acknowledge the Malay language as the national language)
<i>Saya takut untuk berbahasa Melayu kerana takut identiti saya terhapus.</i> ( I am afraid to speak Malay due to fear of disengagement from own identity)

Fig.3: Students' perception on the usage of certain languages depicting ethnicity or national identity

<i>Saya akan menggunakan bahasa Melayu ketika berjumpa dengan rakan dari etnik lain di kantin.</i> (I will use Malay if I met friends of different ethnicity in the canteen)
<i>Saya lebih suka menggunakan bahasa etnik saya ketika berinteraksi dengan rakan sesama etnik.</i> (I prefer using my mother tongue when interacting with friends of similar ethnic)
<i>Saya akan menukar penggunaan bahasa apabila berinteraksi dengan etnik lain.</i> (I will code-switch when interacting with friends of different ethnicity)

Fig.4: Students' choice of language and its functions

<i>Saya rasa selasa kalau etnik lain dapat menggunakan bahasa etnik saya.</i> (I am comfortable seeing friends of different ethnicity using my mother tongue)
<i>Saya sedia untuk menukar bahasa yang sedang saya gunakan dengan rakan seetnik dengan saya jika bercakap dengan rakan dari etnik lain.</i> (I am ready to code-switch from my mother tongue to another language when speaking with friends of different ethnicity)
<i>Saya bersedia untuk menggunakan bahasa Melayu walaupun tidak sempurna.</i> (I am ready to use the Malay language even though it is not perfect)

Fig.5: Students' perception on language that has the greatest impact on national integration



For validation, an interview (See Appendix C) was carried out to ensure the reliability of the responses obtained from the questionnaire. In addition to interviewing the students, teachers' perceptions on this issue were also obtained during an interview due to their personal experience at school and their engagement with students on a daily basis although they were not involved in answering the questionnaire.

Sixty students equally distributed between two, a Chinese vernacular school and a Chinese Independent school, were conveniently selected. Comparing the responses from these two schools was not the purpose of this study but they served as a fair representation of both government-aided and private Chinese schools in Malaysia adopting Mandarin as the MOI. It was also easier to obtain the consent from the students as well as permission of their principals before the study could be conducted, one of the requirements of convenience sampling adopted for this study.

After retrieving the questionnaires from thirty students each in the two urban Chinese schools, their understanding of the use of certain languages to unite a country and their preferred language as well as their perception on the impact of language on national integration was analysed. It was followed by an interview with four teachers and ten students equally distributed between the Chinese vernacular school and Chinese Independent school for triangulation purposes.

The limitations of this study are the small number of respondents (60 in all) and the two Chinese schools which do not represent the whole Malaysian Chinese community. However, this small scale study is conducted to obtain feedback on the real situation existing in Chinese vernacular schools with regards whether the adopted MOI contributes to unity or disunity. Another limitation is the partial involvement of teachers in contributing viewpoints which are significant in revealing the present picture in Chinese medium schools in propagating unity.

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The Chinese school responses to unity were analyzed in this section according to the three research questions. Fig.6 shows a sampling of the perceptions of students towards the usage of certain languages in depicting ethnicity or national identity (Research Question 1). A total of 78.5% of the Chinese education system students considered Mandarin to be more important than BM, while 95% believed that the constant usage of Mandarin guaranteed its survival and its importance would not diminish, and 99% of them preferred to use Mandarin more than BM for various purposes. In contrast, where BM is concerned, 13% chose to communicate in BM and it was for interaction with their non-Chinese friends. Moreover, 65% showed a less than desired attitude towards the national language, where 24% confessed having relatively low proficiency in BM, 11% were afraid their

Chinese identity might be devalued if BM was used and 30% had great appreciation for Mandarin.

For Research Question 2, where the students' choice of language in interactions was queried (see Fig.10), only 41.7% of the Chinese medium school students believed

that using a similar language (i.e. the Malay language) would reinforce integration among the school community. A majority of the students (86.7%) believed that English or Mandarin should be the national language and 83.3% thought English should replace BM as the unifying language as English is

No	Item	Scale							
		Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Agree (3)		Strongly Agree (4)	
		C.I <sup>1</sup>	V <sup>2</sup>	C.I	>	C.I	>	C.I	>
1	<i>Saya suka menggunakan bahasa etnik/ dialek saya.</i> (I like using my mother tongue/ dialect)	0	0	1	0	13	6	18	22
2	<i>Saya perlu menggunakan bahasa ibunda saya supaya tidak lupus.</i> (I have to use my mother tongue so that it will not die out)	4	0	2	1	5	5	19	24
4	<i>Identiti saya dapat dikenali dengan bahasa yang saya gunakan.</i> (The language I use represent my identity)	4	0	3	3	10	10	13	17
8	<i>Saya hanya akan menggunakan bahasa Melayu apabila berinteraksi dengan rakan berbangsa Melayu sahaja.</i> (I will only use the Malay language when interacting with Malay friends)	3	4	8	5	12	9	7	12
10	<i>Bahasa Melayu patut diselaraskan dan diwajibkan penggunaannya di mana sahaja supaya ia dapat menjadi identiti kebangsaan.</i> (The Malay language should be standardized and its usage must be made compulsory so that it will be the national identity)	14	9	11	9	4	10	0	3
11	<i>Saya mengiktiraf bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa rasmi.</i> (I acknowledge the Malay language as the national language)	7	6	10	10	12	10	0	5
13	<i>Saya lebih mengiktiraf bahasa Cina berbanding bahasa Melayu.</i> (I acknowledge Mandarin more than the Malay language)	1	0	0	3	11	8	18	19
15	<i>Saya menghormati bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa rasmi Malaysia.</i> (I respect and value the Malay language as the official language in Malaysia)	4	2	6	7	12	14	7	8

<sup>1</sup> C.I is the acronym for Chinese Independent Schools

<sup>2</sup> V is the acronym for Vernacular Schools

Fig.6: Perception of the usage of certain languages depicting ethnicity or national identity section

not the native language of any ethnic group in Malaysia. Fig.10 illustrates the students' choice of language and its functions in brief.

When the students were asked to choose their preferred language to converse with their teachers and school authority, 75.7% of them chose Mandarin (see Fig.7). Similarly, when they were again asked to choose between Mandarin and BM for leisure or

formal discussion outside and inside the school environment, it was apparent that Mandarin was their choice, as indicated in Fig.8 and Fig.9. In particular, they claimed that Mandarin was a simpler language to use compared to BM for communicative purposes.

It was confirmed in the interview that the students regarded BM as just a

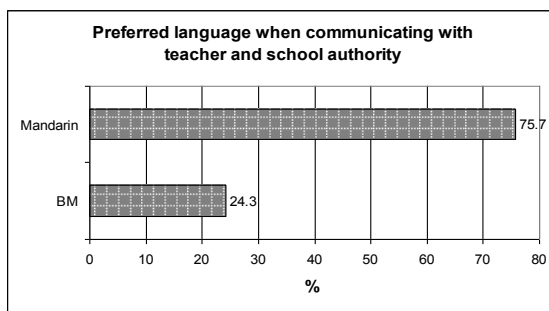


Fig.7: The preferred language when communicating with teachers and school authority

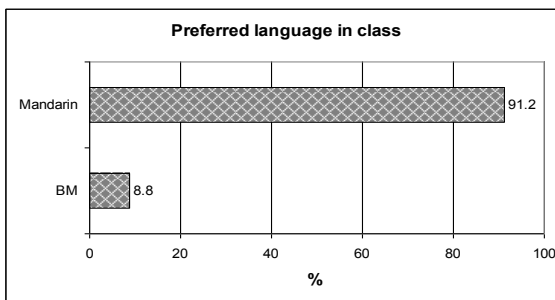


Fig.8: Students' preferred language in class

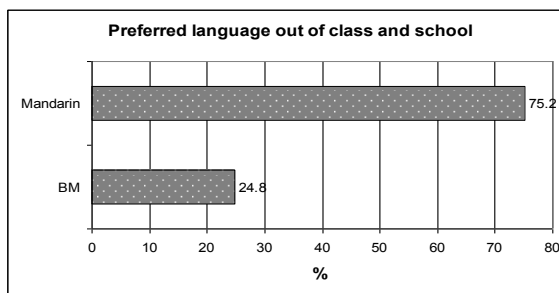


Fig.9: Students' preferred language outside classroom and school environment

compulsory subject in school, when they were asked if BM could be used to unite students in the Chinese medium schools. However, 66.7% of them were willing to use the Malay language even though they were not proficient at it. Below are samples of the students' responses.

... learning BM is a responsibility and it is compulsory. So I learn BM to pass the government exam

(Chinese vernacular school Student 4)

No	Item	Scale							
		Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Agree (3)		Strongly Agree (4)	
		C.I	>	C.I	>	C.I	>	C.I	>
1	<i>Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu ketika berinteraksi dengan pengurusan tertinggi sekolah dan juga pengetua.</i> (I use the Malay language when interacting with the school authorities and the principal)	19	8	8	14	2	7	1	1
2	<i>Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu di luar bilik darjah.</i> (I use the Malay language outside the classroom)	14	12	9	15	6	3	1	0
3	<i>Saya menggunakan bahasa Cina ketika berinteraksi dengan guru.</i> (I use Mandarin when interacting with the teachers)	1	1	10	3	10	20	19	6
4	<i>Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu semasa berinteraksi dengan rakan dalam bilik darjah.</i> (I use the Malay language when interacting with friends in the classroom)	14	13	13	15	2	1	1	1
6	<i>Saya lebih suka menggunakan bahasa Cina berbanding bahasa Melayu di luar kelas.</i> (I prefer using Mandarin more than Malay outside the classroom)	0	0	2	2	4	4	24	24
7	<i>Saya berasa bangga apabila bercakap bahasa Cina.</i> (I feel proud when I am speaking Mandarin)	1	0	1	1	7	7	21	22
8	<i>Saya fasih berbahasa Cina berbanding Bahasa Melayu.</i> (I speak Mandarin fluently as compared to Malay)	1	0	3	1	5	4	21	25
9	<i>Saya berpendapat bahasa Inggeris/ Cina lebih wajar dijadikan bahasa kebangsaan.</i> (I think English/Mandarin should be made the national language)	1	0	3	3	9	8	17	19
12	<i>Saya akan menukar penggunaan bahasa apabila berinteraksi dengan etnik lain.</i> (I will code-switch when interacting with friends of different ethnicity)	0	1	4	7	20	17	6	5
13	<i>Saya sebolehnya mengelak dari bercakap bahasa Melayu apabila di luar kelas.</i> (I will avoid speaking the Malay language outside the classroom)	6	3	9	9	11	14	4	4
15	<i>Bahasa Melayu lebih penting digunakan di luar bilik darjah/sekolah.</i> (The Malay language is significantly used outside the classroom/school)	10	8	16	14	3	6	1	2
18	<i>Bahasa Cina lebih digunakan daripada bahasa Melayu untuk tujuan komunikasi.</i> (Mandarin is used more than Malay for communication purposes)	0	0	5	2	8	7	17	21
21	<i>Berbahasa Cina lebih mudah untuk berkomunikasi dengan etnik lain.</i> (Mandarin is a simpler language to be used to communicate with friends of different ethnicity)	0	2	7	4	7	10	16	14
25	<i>Penggunaan bahasa Inggeris melunturkan jati diri kebangsaan.</i> (Using English will diminish one sense of national identity)	3	12	4	6	16	6	8	5

Fig. 10: The choice of language and its functions

*We grow up in a Chinese environment, so using Mandarin is normal. I learn BM because I live in Malaysia and BM is our national language*

(Chinese Independent school Student 2).

Finally for Research Question 3, where students were asked the language that had the greatest impact on national integration (see Fig.11), a total of 71.7% did not agree with the view that BM would enhance bonding among the different major ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians).

A majority (75.6%) of them agreed that segregation happened among students due to the frequent usage of one's mother tongue. When they were asked whether they were comfortable seeing friends of other ethnic groups using their mother tongue, 85% showed acceptance. In addition, they felt at ease using Mandarin with their non-Chinese friends in school during the interview.

## DISCUSSION

To ensure consistency with the data obtained from the questionnaire, the students' insights to national unity were complemented by the teachers' via interviews. Students' choice

No	Item	Scale							
		Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Agree (3)		Strongly Agree (4)	
		CI	>	CI	>	CI	>	CI	>
1	<i>Saya rasa selasa kalau etnik lain dapat menggunakan bahasa etnik saya.</i> (I am comfortable seeing friends of different ethnicity using my mother tongue)	2	0	5	2	19	11	14	7
2	<i>Saya sedia untuk menukar bahasa yang sedang saya gunakan dengan rakan seetnik dengan saya jika bercakap dengan rakan dari etnik lain.</i> (I will code-switch when interacting with friends of different ethnicity)	0	0	12	3	11	16	7	11
3	<i>Saya bersedia untuk menggunakan bahasa Melayu walaupun tidak sempurna.</i> (I am ready to use the Malay language even though it is not perfect)	5	5	4	4	20	13	2	7
4	<i>Saya percaya penggunaan satu bahasa yang sama iaitu bahasa Melayu dapat mengukuhkan perpaduan di kalangan komuniti sekolah.</i> (I believe by using a similar language i.e. the Malay language can increase unity among the school communities)	10	8	13	7	4	10	3	5
5	<i>Saya yakin penggunaan bahasa Melayu dapat merapatkan hubungan dengan etnik yang lain.</i> (I am certain that using the Malay language can enhance bonding among different ethnicities)	8	7	17	9	5	9	0	5
10	<i>Saya rasa tersisih apabila saya dikalangan rakan etnik lain dan mereka bercakap dalam bahasa etnik mereka.</i> (I feel marginalized if my friends of different ethnicity speak in their mother tongue when I am around)	0	5	11	10	13	11	6	4

Fig. 10: Perception on language that has the greatest impact on national integration

of language was one of the major concerns, as shown in Fig.7, Fig.8, and Fig.9. It appears that students in Chinese schools preferred Mandarin as their language of choice because of their fluency in the language, the lack of interactions with other races in the school and its usefulness as a language of communication. The students were very comfortable using Mandarin to express themselves. There were limited opportunities for them to use BM with other races in a monolingual school and Mandarin could be used within Malaysia and internationally. Interestingly, most teachers agreed that the usage of Mandarin was a representation of what and who the students were. The strong preference for Mandarin showed the strong bond they possessed with their Chinese roots. The reasons given below as to why BM was not a preferred language revealed the underlying realities faced by the teachers in propagating unity in the schools:

*We do not have many Malay friends so BM is used for communication purposes in the government sectors like when we want to renew our IC or passport.*

(Chinese Independent school Student 2).

*BM is a compulsory subject to pass in order to obtain the SPM result. We are learning it for the sake of passing the exam and to secure a scholarship or a place in*

*the matriculation, not because we like it.*

(Chinese vernacular school Student 2).

*BM or Bahasa Indonesia are generally used in South East Asia, specifically Malaysia and Indonesia; and it is not the language of trade and business.*

(Chinese Independent school Teacher 2).

*Presently, Chinese is growing economically but the market is very small for Malay. When you look at America, the former president of American, Mr. Bush said people should know China is one huge market by means of Chinese language.*

(Chinese vernacular Teacher 1)

The above responses provided an overall picture of the Chinese medium school students' purpose of learning the national language as well as the teachers' view of the functions of BM. They regarded BM as a tool for personal enhancement ranging from business to education and communication purposes. This stand mirrors Gardner and Lambert's (as cited in Brown, 2007) instrumental motivation in learning a language where instead of wishing to integrate themselves into the culture of a language group in this case, the non-Chinese, they choose to acquire a language

as a means for attaining instrumental goals like furthering a career.

When teachers were asked the problems they face in trying to foster unity among the students, findings from the interviews conducted presented the following viewpoints:

*In my school I can say 99% of the students are Chinese, so the problem of unity happens only when they are outside the school.*

(Chinese vernacular Teacher 2)

*I do not have this kind of chance to realize unity. I do not have any student from different races. Independent schools seldom have other races.*

(Chinese Independent school Teacher 1)

The teachers' points of view, with regard to the mono-ethnic environment, were verified in the ratio of Chinese students and teachers to non-Chinese in both vernacular and Chinese Independent schools shown in the following table. Although there is a strong mix in the Chinese vernacular schools, the number of Chinese students still outnumbered other ethnicity by 7:1, whereas it is 68:1 in Chinese Independent schools.

Lee Lam Thye (as cited in Lim & Kang, 2010), the 1Malaysia Foundation trustee, stresses the same point when he says:

*Students nowadays do not mix much with those of different races. It must also be remembered that students*

*who go to vernacular schools lack the opportunity to get to know friends from other races. This problem may not be so apparent in the remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak, even though there are many indigenous tribes, because all the students go to the same school* (p. 10).

In addition to the above-mentioned realities, the teachers stressed on their main duty in school, which is to complete the syllabus assigned, i.e. Integrative Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM), has discreetly deterred teachers' initiative in propagating national unity. Some of them claimed that they did indirectly tell the students what was right and wrong when they brought up ethnic issues during class discussions. The efforts of these schools in promoting national identity via the national language were insufficient as a result of the struggle among the teachers to balance a variety of tasks and responsibilities at the same time. Since the implementation of KBSM by Malaysian Education Ministry, teachers according to Shahril@Charil Marzuki and Habib Mat Som (as cited in Idris Aman & Rosniah Mustaffa, 2006) have to plan numerous activities and teaching aids to enhance students' ability and interest. Additionally, they should produce individuals who are literate in Information and Communicative Technology and who are capable of exploring new knowledge so that they can communicate effectively in multiple socio-cultural conditions (Zahirah,

as cited in Idris Aman & Rosniah Mustaffa, 2006).

Another interesting phenomenon is the preference of more than half of the students choosing English over BM as the unifying language. No doubt English is not the native language of any ethnic group in Malaysia, thus known as 'neutral' (Ong, 2005), but it was once a colonizer's language. This fact, however, does not stop some Malaysians including the respondents of this study from appreciating its benefit. The students from Chinese vernacular MOI are aware that English will be used for more purposes in the future. This is substantiated by the fact that these students formed the majority group who agreed that English would remain the world language as in the British Council's English 2000 Global Consultation Questionnaire conducted by Graddol (2000).

In general, consideration of BM as a language of communication in Malaysia, the lack of interactions with friends from other ethnic groups in the Chinese medium school, the emphasis teachers placed on the efficacy in delivering the content of a subject and championing of English appear to have a negative effect on national unity.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of the small samples of subjects and schools, the current study was able to provide reasonable answers as to how students portrayed ethnicity and national identities via the use of Mandarin. They believe that the language used symbolizes their ethnic and cultural roots.

Besides, it also had social economic value. In terms of language choice, students prefer using Mandarin in their daily interactions while English in their opinion can be the ultimate language to unite Malaysians. The rationale of disregarding BM as a unifying language was because students had failed to understand the association between unity and the use of language. This perception was compounded by the realities teachers faced in trying to promote unity in the school into their teaching.

Shedding light on the issue of unity in Malaysia, this study has unravelled responses directly from the affected parties. However, issues brought up by other researchers regarding Chinese education in Malaysia must also be taken into consideration when considering national unity. Wong (2006) pointed out a profusion of benefits (for example, enhancing the competence of Malaysian student as being multilingual, promotion of Chinese culture and tradition to the others, broadening the opportunity to study abroad) that Malaysia can obtain by having Chinese language education in relation to globalization. Chong and Norsimah (2007) highlighted the Chinese's determination to strengthen their mother tongue through the institutionalization of Chinese education was a result of the fear of language assimilation under the national language policy as reflected in the responses obtained from this study when the students and teachers appeared to be holding strongly to their mother tongue.

To conclude, having a multi-ethnic environment in which students get to



study, play and progress together is an ideal school. Besides ensuring the development of national integration and national unity, the young may understand and appreciate their motherland as a whole. Many Malaysians have suggested a single-stream school system to achieve national cohesiveness but it is not politically feasible to eliminate Chinese-medium schools as this will lead to political chaos and instability for the nation (Gill, 2007). It is also not right to presume vernacular schools as the major contributing cause of disharmony as there are other causes of disunity among Malaysians. Therefore, attempts should be made to identify these causes. Meanwhile, the government should continue to provide access to maternal languages of the dominant ethnic groups besides encouraging actual interaction and engagement among the various races to learn the meaning of becoming a true Malaysian.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS) are not subsidized in any form by the government; therefore, these schools are funded by initiatives of various Chinese associations and community projects and relatively higher tuition fees (Chong & Norsimah, 2007). ICSS are grouped under the roof of Chinese Private Education System, monitored by The Private Education division (PED) also known as Bahagian Pendidikan Swasta (BP Swasta) ([www.schoolmalaysia.com](http://www.schoolmalaysia.com)).

<sup>2</sup>Mother tongue, by definition is the first language of a particular ethnic group. In this sense, Hua Yu being a language that is taught formally in school may not be the mother tongue as per se, as these children may have been speaking some forms of mother tongue, which are the Chinese dialects. But it has been widely acknowledged that the mother tongue of the Malaysian Chinese is solely Hua Yu (Mandarin) (Chong & Norsimah, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>At secondary level, the only MOI is BM hence it is called National schools except private secondary schools.

<sup>4</sup>In 2002, the then prime minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad introduced a new policy called the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (Pengajaran Pendidikan Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris-PPSMI) where English is made the language of instruction of the mentioned subjects aiming to enhance students' English proficiency while learning the content. However, after 7 years of implementation, the Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) has decided to end the policy by 2012 (Norhashimah Jalaluddin, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>“One school system adopts Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. Pupils would then be given the option to study their mother tongues. Under this system, the Malays will also have the option of studying other languages like Mandarin and Tamil and this will further boost unity among them,” said Mukhriz Mahathir (as cited in Elias, 2008).

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## APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE

A

### Bahagian A

#### Latar Belakang Responden

Bil.	Item	Jawapan
1	Jantina	Lelaki Perempuan
2	Etnik	Melayu Cina India Bumiputera Lain-lain (Nyatakan):
3	Negeri Asal	
4	Agama	Islam Buddha Hindu Lain-lain (Nyatakan):
5	Bahasa Ibunda	
6	Nama Sekolah Rendah	
7	Nama Sekolah Menengah	
8	Kawasan Kediaman Keluarga	Kampung Pekan Bandar Bandaraya

### Bahagian B

Sila jawab pernyataan di bawah dengan menandakan  $\surd$  mengikut skala berikut.

1. SANGAT TIDAK SETUJU    2. TIDAK SETUJU    3. SETUJU  
4. SANGAT SETUJU

Mengkaji bagaimana bahasa menggambarkan etnik dan identiti kebangsaan.

Bil	Item	Skala			
		1	2	3	4
1	Saya suka menggunakan bahasa etnik/dialek saya.				
2	Saya perlu menggunakan bahasa ibunda saya supaya tidak lupus.				
3	Saya perlu menggunakan bahasa ibunda saya supaya dapat diwariskan kepada generasi seterusnya.				
4	Identiti saya dapat dikenali dengan bahasa yang saya gunakan.				
5	Bahasa yang selalu saya gunakan melambangkan identiti saya.				
6	Saya faham bahasa Melayu tetapi tidak fasih dalam bertutur.				
7	Saya lebih kerap menggunakan bahasa Melayu di sekolah berbanding sebelum ini.				

8	Saya hanya akan menggunakan bahasa Melayu apabila berinteraksi dengan rakan berbangsa Melayu sahaja.				
9	Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu ketika berinteraksi dengan rakan saya dari etnik/dialek lain.				
10	Bahasa Melayu patut diselaraskan dan diwajibkan penggunaannya di mana sahaja supaya ia dapat menjadi identiti kebangsaan.				
11	Saya mengiktiraf bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa rasmi.				
12	Saya takut untuk berbahasa Melayu kerana takut identiti saya terhapus.				
13	Saya lebih mengiktiraf bahasa Cina berbanding bahasa Melayu.				
14	Saya suka menggunakan bahasa Inggeris/ Cina apabila berinteraksi dengan rakan etnik kecuali etnik Melayu.				
15	Saya menghormati bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa rasmi Malaysia.				

### Bahagian C

Sila jawab pernyataan di bawah dengan menandakan  $\surd$  mengikut skala berikut.

1. SANGAT TIDAK SETUJU    2. TIDAK SETUJU    3. SETUJU  
4. SANGAT SETUJU

Mengkaji pilihan bahasa dan fungsi bahasa tersebut di dalam dan luar kelas.

Bil	Item	Skala			
		1	2	3	4
1	Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu ketika berinteraksi dengan pengurusan tertinggi sekolah dan juga pengetua.				
2	Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu di luar bilik darjah.				
3	Saya menggunakan bahasa Cina ketika berinteraksi dengan guru.				
4	Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu semasa berinteraksi dengan rakan dalam bilik darjah.				
5	Saya menggunakan bahasa Melayu dalam perbincangan tugas.				
6	Saya lebih suka menggunakan bahasa Cina berbanding bahasa Melayu di luar kelas.				
7	Saya berasa bangga apabila bercakap bahasa Cina.				
8	Saya fasih berbahasa Cina berbanding Bahasa Melayu.				
9	Saya berpendapat bahasa Inggeris/ Cina lebih wajar dijadikan bahasa kebangsaan.				
10	Saya akan menggunakan bahasa Melayu ketika berjumpa dengan rakan dari etnik lain di kantin.				
11	Saya lebih suka menggunakan bahasa etnik saya ketika berinteraksi dengan rakan sesama etnik.				
12	Saya akan menukar penggunaan bahasa apabila berinteraksi dengan etnik lain.				
13	Saya sebolehnya megelak dari bercakap bahasa Melayu apabila di luar kelas.				
14	Bahasa Cina lebih penting digunakan di luar bilik darjah/sekolah.				

15	Bahasa Melayu lebih penting digunakan di luar bilik darjah/sekolah.				
16	Bahasa Cina lebih digunakan daripada bahasa Melayu di luar bilik darjah/sekolah.				
17	Bahasa Melayu lebih digunakan daripada bahasa Cina di luar bilik darjah/sekolah.				
18	Bahasa Cina lebih digunakan daripada bahasa Melayu untuk tujuan komunikasi.				
19	Bahasa Melayu lebih digunakan daripada bahasa Cina untuk tujuan komunikasi.				
20	Saya akan menggunakan bahasa Inggeris/ Cina terlebih dahulu untuk menegur tetamu sekolah.				
21	Berbahasa Cina lebih mudah untuk berkomunikasi dengan etnik lain.				
22	Berbahasa Melayu lebih mudah untuk berkomunikasi dengan etnik lain.				
23	Saya akan berbahasa Cina apabila berurusan di kaunter perkhidmatan di sekolah.				
24	Saya akan berbahasa Melayu apabila membuat panggilan kepada rakan etnik lain.				
25	Penggunaan bahasa Inggeris melunturkan jati diri kebangsaan.				

#### Bahagian D

Sila jawab pernyataan di bawah dengan menandakan  $\surd$  mengikut skala berikut.

1. SANGAT TIDAK SETUJU    2. TIDAK SETUJU    3. SETUJU  
4. SANGAT SETUJU

Sejauhmana bahasa terlibat dalam mengukuhkan dan memisahkan komuniti.

Bil	Item	Skala			
		1	2	3	4
1	Saya rasa sesala kalau etnik lain dapat menggunakan bahasa etnik saya.				
2	Saya sedia untuk menukar bahasa yang sedang saya gunakan dengan rakan seetnik dengan saya jika bercakap dengan rakan dari etnik lain.				
3	Saya bersedia untuk menggunakan bahasa Melayu walaupun tidak sempurna.				
4	Saya percaya penggunaan satu bahasa yang sama iaitu bahasa Melayu dapat mengukuhkan perpaduan di kalangan komuniti sekolah.				
5	Saya yakin penggunaan bahasa Melayu dapat merapatkan hubungan dengan etnik yang lain.				
6	Penggunaan bahasa Melayu di kalangan pelajar sekolah dapat meningkatkan jati diri kebangsaan.				
7	Saya berdebat bahasa Inggeris dapat mengukuhkan perpaduan di kalangan komuniti sekolah kerana Bahasa Inggeris merupakan bahasa yang tidak dipunyai oleh mana-mana etnik di Malaysia.				
8	Saya berpendapat bahasa etnik lain harus dilarang penggunaannya dan semua pelajar dan staff sekolah mesti bercakap bahasa Melayu ketika di dalam sekolah.				

9	Penggunaan bahasa mengikut etnik secara berleluasa oleh pelajar sekolah menanamkan sifat perkauman antara pelajar.				
10	Saya rasa tersisih apabila saya dikalangan rakan etnik lain dan mereka bercakap dalam bahasa etnik mereka.				

Note: This questionnaire was adapted from Fazilah *et al.* (2009) *Bahasa dan Kejelekitan Sosial dalam Membentuk Jati Diri Kebangsaan* supported by UKM-GPP-PPKK-06-2009. However, we have significantly changed it to suit our research purposes.

**APPENDIX B**

Fazilah *et al.* (2009) Questionnaire

Fazilah *et al.* (2009). *Bahasa dan kejelekitan sosial dalam membentuk jati diri kebangsaan* [Language and social cohesion in forming national identity]. Unpublished manuscript.

(Please find the separate document entitled Fazilah *et al.* questionnaire)



**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

For Students	For Teachers
What does being a Malaysian mean?	Smith (1991) characterized national identity as a multidimensional concept, which also includes a specific language, sentiments and symbolism. What is your view on the definition of “national identity”?
What does being a Chinese in Malaysia mean?	To what extent do you agree that to belong to an ethnic group is to possess a common descent, cultural heritage, religion, language and a distinctive history and destiny and to feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity?
How do you identify yourself? Do you feel that you are Malaysian first and then Chinese, OR Chinese first and then Malaysian as in Malaysian of Chinese ethnicity OR Chinese Malaysian? Why?	Which do you emphasize in your teaching, “national identity” or “ethnic identity”. What are your reasons for doing so?
In a survey, 78.5% of the Chinese education system students consider Mandarin is more important than the Malay language (BM)? Why is this so?	In a survey, 78.5% of the Chinese education system students consider Mandarin is more important than the Malay language (BM)? Why is this so?
In a survey, only 28.3% of the Chinese students prefer using BM outside the classroom. Why is this happening?	In a survey, only 28.3% of the Chinese students prefer using BM outside the classroom. Why is this happening?
Do you think BM can be used to unite students in Chinese medium schools? Why?	The education policy has identified the undisputed role of BM as the medium of instruction (in SMJK to be specific) but in reality teachers and students converse in Mandarin and sometimes the teaching is also carried out in this language. In your view, how will the inculcation of national identity amongst these students be affected by this practice?
How do you think the school system can contribute to unity?	What can be done to help Chinese medium schools students respect and acknowledge BM.?
Do you learn about cultures and languages of the other ethnic groups in Malaysia? If yes, in what ways?	Do you think BM can be used to unite students in Chinese medium schools? Why?
	How do you use language to instil the values of unity among your students in school?
	Could you please share the problems you face in trying to instil unity among the students in your school?
	How do you think the school system can contribute to unity?
	Do the students learn about cultures and languages of the other ethnic groups in Malaysia? If yes, in what ways?

