VERNACULAR EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Background

The earliest development of the education system in Malaysia can be traced to the 15th century in which receiving formal education was still a privilege of feudal societies. Not until the British colonialisation did mass groups of workers from China and India immigrate to the land of Malaya and extend their network. With the growing demand for education opportunities, each ethnicity developed their own vernacular schools and curriculums under the British divide and rule policy. Four types of schools with mediums of instruction in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil were available during British colonisation. After the devastating World War II, the education system in Malaysia faced the challenges of being revitalised and built with a national image on the path towards independence.

Timeline

A timeline is presented below to showcase the post-war major education reports, policies and incidents regarding the vernacular education in Malaysia:

1951 The Barnes Report

All primary vernacular schools became national schools to use one single standardised system with bilingual languages, i.e. Malay and English; secondary schools maintained English as medium of instruction.

1952 The Fenn–Wu Report

It supported one national educational system but maintained the Chinese-medium schools.

1956 The Razak Report

- All schools adopt a common standardised syllabus in which the primary schools consist of Standard (Malay as medium of instruction) and Standard-type (using Chinese, Tamil or English as medium of instruction, where Malay and English are the compulsory subjects), while the secondary schools are catered for children whom have satisfactorily completed the primary education, consisting of independent and direct grant.
- Clause 12 states that "the **ultimate objective** of educational policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national educational system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction, though we recognise that progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual."

The Education Ordinance 1957 (based on the Razak Report)

The "ultimate objective" was not included due to strong protest from the non-Malay communities.

1960 The Rahman Talib Report

- Emphasis on Malay language as main language in schools and reintroduction of the "ultimate objective".
- Standard schools became National schools while Standard-type school turned into National-type schools.

The Education Act 1961 (based on the Rahman Talib Report)

- Establishment of common curriculum in which Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction and the use of Bahasa Malaysia and English as the mediums of national public examination system.
- Section 21(2) stipulates that "if at any time the Minister is satisfied that a National-type primary school can suitably be converted into a National primary school, he may order that such primary school be converted into a National primary school."
- 54 Chinese secondary schools accepted government grants and converted into National-type (Chinese) secondary schools, while the remaining 16 Chinese schools became the Chinese independent high schools which continued to use the Chinese language as the main medium of instruction without any financial aid from the government. Some boards of directors in those National-type (Chinese) secondary schools were divided in opinions afterwards and resumed their counterparts in the independent high school form.

Latest updated in August 2016

1985 The proposal of **Integration School Programme** (***Program Sekolah Integrasi***)

- The three streams of schools, i.e. national primary school and national-type (Chinese and Tamil) primary schools were placed at one area in order to strengthen national unity.
- Due to strong protest from the Chinese community, the government had a talk to Chinese representatives, *Dong Jiao Zong* on 7th November 1985 and came up with a compromise to replace the programme with **Student Integration Programme for Unity** (***Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan***) that encouraged joint extra-curricular activities amongst students from different streams of schools.

1986 The Ministry of Education officially distributed **the Guidebook of Student Integration Programme for Unity** (***Buku Panduan Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan***) to various schools. The feedbacks from participating schools were generally positive, but it was shelved immediately after the change of the minister of education.

Timeline

1995 Introduction of **Vision School Programme** (***Rancangan Sekolah Wawasan***) which gathered three streams of schools on a single campus to share facilities like canteen, library and halls but with separate administrative bodies and teachers. The first batch of vision schools were built under the 7th Malaysia Plan.

The Education Act 1996 (amended from the Education Act 1961)

- Removal of Section 21(2) about the power of the minister of education on converting National-type schools.
- Educational institutions were categorised into government educational institutions, government-aided educational institutions and private educational institutions.
- National language as the main medium of language in all educational institutions in the National Education System except National-type schools or any other educational institution exempted by the Minister of Education where national language should be taught as a compulsory subject.
- In a national secondary school, the Chinese or Tamil language should be made available if the parents of at least 15 pupils in the school requested.

2003 Implementation of **Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris** (**PPSMI, '*Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English*'**), making English as the medium of teaching and learning the subjects of science and mathematics in national schools, Tamil national-type schools and secondary schools.

2006 Reintroduction of **Student Integration Programme for Unity** (***Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan, RIMUP***) to promote inclusiveness amongst students from national and national-type primary schools with the involvement of teachers and parents.

2009 The Cabinet announced to abolish PPSMI with the replacement by **Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkasakan Bahasa Inggeris** (**MBMMBI, '*To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and To Strengthen the English Language*'**). The MBMMBI policy sets the Malay language as the medium of instruction at the national schools and secondary schools, the Chinese language at Chinese national-type schools and the Tamil language at Tamil national-type schools.

2010 Establishment of **Trust School Programme** (***Program Sekolah Amanah***) in the form of public-private partnership to improve the quality of education. Following the success of the first 50 schools, the government now aims to increase the number of trust schools to 700 by 2025.

2011 Opened admission of **Program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan** (**PISMP, '*Bachelor of Teaching Degree Programme*'**) **for UEC graduates** who obtained a credit in at least three UEC subjects and scored a minimum of grade C for Bahasa Malaysia and credits for English and History in SPM.

Overview of Chinese and Tamil Education in Malaysia

Chinese

Tamil

Origins (1400–1786)

Early in the nineteenth century, Chinese education was established in the form of private home school in the peninsular of Malaya due to mass immigration of workers from China.

They recruited teachers and brought in textbooks from China using their own resources – either sponsored by the Chinese community associations or self-funded – to provide education to children.

One of the earliest Chinese private home schools was Wu Fu Shu Yuan established in 1819, which can still be found in Penang today.

The early development and growth of Tamil schools in Malaya was closely linked to the operation of rubber estates, coffee, sugar-cane and coconut plantations when the Indians was brought into the peninsular to work in estates and plantations in the nineteenth century.

They brought in teachers and textbooks from India and adopted the Indian curriculum.

The first Tamil class was held in Penang Free School in 1816.

British Colonisation Before WWII (1786–1942)

In the 1920s, the Chinese education in Malaya faced great resistance from the British colonial government who was worried about the spread of revolutionism given the May Fourth Movement 1919 occurred in China. The British colonial government tried to enforce laws and regulations to control Chinese schools by providing financial aids. Despite the British intervention, the number of Chinese schools in the peninsular of Malaya had been growing rapidly from 252 in 1921 to 1015 in 1938. This development came to a halt due to the Japanese invasion in World War II.

Initially built by the Indian workers without any aid from the British government or the employers, the Tamil schools lacked proper resources to function effectively. Most pupils remained in the plantation and worked as labourers. In 1923, the British government enforced the Labour Enactment that each estate is entitled to open a school when there were more than 10 Indian children aged 7 to 14 years old. It also provided some financial assistance to progressive schools and opened free Tamil schools for children of the public works department and railway workers. By 1930, there were four types of Tamil schools, i.e. government schools, estate schools, Indian community private schools and the Christian missionary private schools, all of which were categorised according to their financing sources.

All schools were forced to adopt Japanese curriculum during the Japanese invasion in WWII (1941–1945).

Number of Schools After WWII

More than 1,000

Increasing to its peak at 888 in 1957

Overview of Chinese and Tamil Education in Malaysia

Chinese

Tamil

Representative Bodies

To protect mother-tongue education against the government, **the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia** (**UCSTAM**) or *Jiao Zong* was founded in 1951 in response to the release of the Barnes Report 1951, whereas **the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia** (**UCSCAM**) or *Dong Zong* was established in 1954. Thereafter, the two organisations work closely with each other to take the lead of fighting for Chinese education with its liaison committee named "*Dong Jiao Zong*".

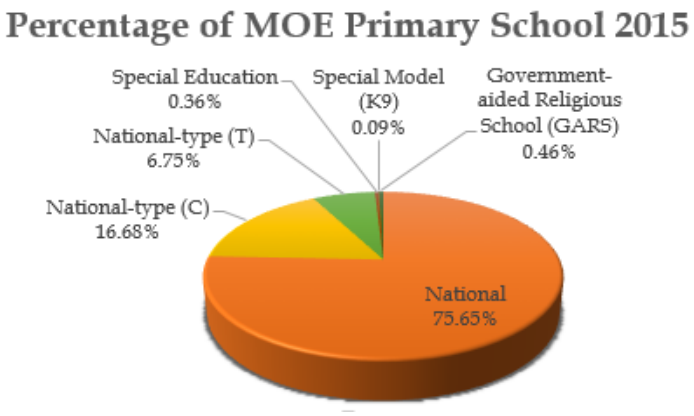
Given the declining number of Tamil primary schools after independence, an organisation committed to helping communities through research, development and publication focused on Tamil school students' development was established officially in 2003, namely the Tamil Foundation Malaysia.

Internal Examination System

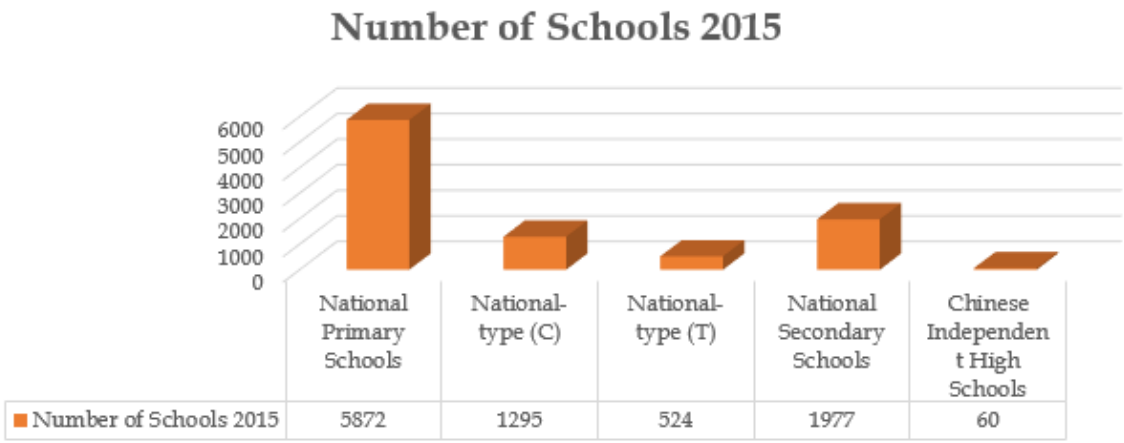
To assess the academic performance of students in the teaching medium of Chinese language, the UCSCAM ('Dong Zong') organises and coordinates its internal standardised test – **Unified Examination Certificate** (**UEC**) commenced in 1975, which emphasizes equal importance of three languages' use, i.e. Chinese, Malay and English. Over the years, the UEC has gained wide recognition as a qualification for entrance into many tertiary educational institutions around the world, including Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada etc. It is not recognised by the Malaysian government for entry into public universities despite the recognition of most local private universities and colleges. Some Chinese independent high schools hence opt to teach the national secondary school curriculum simultaneously to provide students an opportunity to obtain government-recognised certificates like PMR and SPM.

Due to the fact that all Tamil secondary schools were converted into national schools that follow national curriculum, there is none of Tamil independent examination system.

Basic Statistics



Source: Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia



Source: Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia

Table: The Racial Distribution of Student Numbers in National-type (Chinese) Schools

Year	Chinese	Bumiputera	Indian	Others	Total
2010	539,621 *(88.2%)*	55,976 *(9.1%)*	10,197 *(1.7%)*	6,270 *(1.0%)*	612,064
2012	520,907 *(86.7%)*	61,336 *(10.2%)*	11,443 *(1.9%)*	7,245 *(1.2%)*	600,931
2014	483,852 *(84.7%)*	66,647 *(11.7%)*	12,604 *(2.2%)*	8,212 *(1.4%)*	571,315
Changes	-10.33%	+19.06%	+23.60%	+30.97%	-6.66%

Source: Report on National-type Chinese Primary Schools in K.L. published in Nov 2015 by UCSTAM (Jiao Zong)

Memories

Lim Lian Geok
"Soul of the Malaysian Chinese"

Tamil education is celebrating its 200 years of legacy in 2016.

Quick Facts of MOE Blueprint 2013-2025 on Learning Language

Goal 1

Fostering a unique shared identity between Malaysians anchored in the ability to be proficient in the use of a common national language, **Bahasa Malaysia**.

Goal 2

Developing individuals that are equipped to work in a globalised economy where the **English language** is the international language of communication.

Goal 3

Providing opportunities to learn **an additional language**.

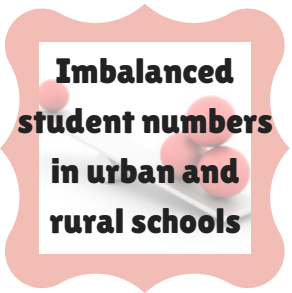
Others

- **The Pupil's Own Language Policy** requires all government schools to offer mother tongue language as a taught subject when at least 15 students request it.
- Currently, 15% of students pass the optional Chinese language, Tamil or Arabic papers at SPM.

Major Challenges Faced by National-type Schools

Since the takeover of office, the Deputy Minister of Education Chong Sin Woon recognised the pertaining problem of shortage of teachers in Chinese primary schools , while the Tamil Foundation also revealed the need of solving shortage of trained teachers in Tamil schools in a roundtable conference held in June 2011.

Chinese primary schools receive declining development funds since 1970s which are not in proportion to the size of their student numbers. Similarly, Tamil schools lack development funds to improve facilities, being less attractive to new enrolment.



Rural schools face under-enrolment rates whereas urban schools are overcrowded. More than 50% of Tamil schools and about 1/3 of Chinese primary schools are under-enrolled as 'Sekolah Kurang Murid (SKM)' with less than 150 students. On the contrary, urban schools have overcrowding problem without fully support from the government to expand national-type schools.