

# The Importance of Traditional Games in Nurturing Concept of Unity Among Preschool Students

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## Abstract

This concept paper aims to explain the importance of fostering unity through unity activities in educational institutions. In general, in order to ensure that the unity of the Malaysian nation is in a stable and harmonious state in the future, the cultivation of unity needs to be revealed continuously and starting at the early childhood education level. A variety of unity activities can be done among preschool students, including fostering the concept of unity through traditional games. Exposure to traditional games for preschool students not only exposes them to the concept of unity, but also improves children's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development. Therefore, this concept paper focuses on the definition of the concept of unity through education and the importance of unity activities through education. This concept paper also discusses the importance of traditional game elements as a tools for introducing the concept of unity to children.

**Keywords:** Unity, Traditional Games, Preschool, Children, Concept of Unity

## Introduction

Malaysia is a country with multi-ethnic and multi-racial society. Ethnic diversity in Malaysia encompasses the Malays, Chinese and Indians as the three main ethnicities and is complemented by ethnic groups from Sabah, Sarawak and Orang Asli. Every ethnicity in Malaysia has its own identity and ethnic heritage (Adam et al., 2021). To ensure that the harmony between ethnic and racial groups in Malaysia can be maintained, the foundation of unity among the community must be in a stable and strong state. This stable foundation of unity can be achieved through tolerance and good social cohesion (Jusoh & Embong, 2021). According to the Ministry of National Unity; KPN (2021) in the National Unity Policy, social cohesion within the Malaysian state exists on the basis of tolerance and social consensus that dates back to the post-independence period.

However, based on a report by the Ministry of National Unity (2022) in the National Unity Index Acknowledgement 2022, the level of unity among Malaysians still recorded an index value of 0.629 which is at a moderate level. To ensure that the National Unity Index remains at an encouraging level, various strategies have been set out by the KPN in the National Unity Policy. According to the KPN (2021), The essence of the second aspect of National Identity in the strategy of promoting and valuing diverse cultures should be instilled through education starting from a young age. This is also pointed out by Adam et al (2021)

who stated that the role of education is very large and influential in fostering racial unity in Malaysia. Additionally, Rahim et al (2019) also stated that unity should begin at the school level. Through education, the spirit of patriotism, tolerance, collaborative and other noble values can be cultivated in the soul of every individual in Malaysia. The inculcation of noble values that started at this school level is thus able to foster unity among the community in Malaysia (Jamaluddin, 2011). Besides that by instilling values of respect, understanding and tolerance in students, the education system in Malaysia aims to create a sense of unity among its diverse population (James et al., 2022).

The culture, customs and cultural heritage of the various ethnicities in Malaysia should be exposed to students in Malaysia starting from the early childhood through formal education in school. Awareness on multiculturalism in Malaysia should be instilled in schools as education can bring students from diverse backgrounds and cultures together Husin & Dawi (2019) through various educational programmes (Rahim et al., 2019). In addition, the strengthening of the national language, namely Malay Language in schools, the involvement of students in extracurricular and co-curricular activities that involve the participation of various races can also increase the level of racial unity in schools (Husin & Dawi, 2019; Hussein & Abdullah, 2018). Organising unity programmes through education will also be more effective when implemented in a conducive setting and adequate infrastructure (Ministry of National Unity, 2021).

### **Concept of Unity Through Education**

The education structure in Malaysia includes preschool education for children aged four to six, primary school and secondary school. Education in Malaysia targets the formation of a brilliant and high-skilled human capital for the provision of labor and the development of a developed country in the future. In addition, education in Malaysia also targets the cultivation of unity among students through education. According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia MOE (2013) in Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the concept of integration and unity is important to be nurtured in schools to form individuals of society who have the same national identity regardless of ethnicity.

The formation of national identity and social cohesion among students will occur when there is social interaction between students from different backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomics and religions. Through these interactions, students will learn to respect each other and appreciate diversity (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). According to Jusoh and Embong (2021), the social cohesion enjoyed today is the result of the formulation of government policies including fostering unity through education. Furthermore, racial unity in Malaysia can be acknowledged and formed through strong social cohesion that may occur through education (Zakaria et al., 2012).

The fostering of unity through education in Malaysia began before Malaysia's independence which was stated in the Razak Statement 1956 (Abdullah & Ong, 2017). Among the main goals of the Razak Statement which is the basis for the Education Ordinance 1957 Sivalingam (2020) is to make Malay Language as national language, to produce racial unity by reducing the racial disparities as well as building a tolerant, disciplined and progressive society. Uslim et al (2022) stated that the Razak Statement stressed the need for racial unity through education. The importance of unity through education should be emphasized in order to build a united and harmonious society. The three main foundations in the Razak Statement for fostering unity are the national schooling system for all, Malay Language as the medium of

instruction in schools and the usage of standard national curriculum in all types of schools (Abdullah & Ong, 2017).

This Razak Statement was later refined in the Rahman Talib Report which formed the basis for the Education Act 1961 (Uslim et al., 2022). The Rahman Talib Report acknowledges that education is the main platform for fostering racial unity in Malaysia. Among the matters enshrined in the Education Act 1961 is the strengthening of Malay as the medium of instruction in national schools and the use of Chinese and Tamil as the medium of instruction in national-type schools (Sivalingam, 2020). The Malay language is made a compulsory subject to pass at the public examination level to ensure that unity through education can be strengthened (Abdullah & Ong, 2017). To date, as enshrined in the Education Act 1996, Bahasa Melayu as the national language is the primary medium of instruction in every national school and is made a compulsory subject in national-type schools to foster racial cohesion in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, MOE 2017a).

As enshrined in the National Education Policy (MOE 2017a), various implementation strategies to foster the concept of unity through education have been outlined. This strategy of strengthening unity is essential for the building of the nation-state of Malaysia and the building of a national identity. The implementation strategies outlined include :

- I. Use of the National Curriculum in all types of schools in the national education system
- II. Malay as a National Language is used as the main medium of instruction in educational institutions and the strengthening of Malay subjects in national-type schools;
- III. Improvement of teaching and learning of History subjects;
- IV. To conduct programmes based on the Constitution of the State; and
- V. Chinese Language, Tamil Language and Arabic Communication were introduced as added subjects in the National Schools.

The strategy of strengthening unity through education implemented at each level of education forms the basis for the sowing of noble values and the sense of belonging in each student. Thus, fostering this concept of unity requires cooperation from all parties including the Department of Education, school administrators, teachers as communicators of the knowledge of unity Naidu et al (2021); Yong et al (2018) as well as the role of parents as the first teacher of each student (Rahim et al., 2019).

### **Concept of Unity Through Preschool Education**

The pre-school education stage is the basic education for each individual which aims for children between four to six-year-olds. In Malaysia, children receive early education through enrollment in private kindergartens or government kindergartens that using the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK) as a guide to the construction of potential pupils at early age (MOE, 2017b). A quality and comprehensive curriculum during early childhood education is essential for the balanced, positive and self-confident child development (Nor et al., 2017). As such, it is very appropriate if this concept of unity is introduced at the preschool level as outlined in the KSPK by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. As been mentioned by Rahim et al (2019), it is crucial or this concept of unity to be instilled as early as preschool level.

The National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK) is a guide based on the six main pillars of Communication; Attitude and Values; Humanities; Self-Being; Physical Development and Aesthetics and Science and Technology. To foster unity among children and to produce children with a spirit of patriotism, the Pillar of Humanity within the KSPK emphasizes an

appreciation of unity and love for the nation. Learning activities in the Humanitarian Front will prepare children to be responsible citizens, proud of their national identity and able to show respect for Malaysia's cultural heritage. Additionally, this pre-school curriculum also intends to produce students with 21st-century skills. Children with 21st century skills are expected to have positive characteristics such as being resilient, principled and patriotic towards Malaysia. According to Daud and Ishak (2022), the value of patriotism should be instilled among students as early as childhood as children can easily absorb new knowledge and values effectively.

The pre-school curriculum in Malaysia also emphasizes Islamic Education learning for Muslim children and Moral Education for non-Muslim children. Exposure to good values and values of unity is implemented as early as preschool age to produce students of noble character regardless of race or religion. According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013), learning the concept of unity and good values to the young child must be done through role-playing, simulation and discussion activities. Additionally, fostering unity among preschool students can be achieved by incorporating interactive teaching aids into play-based learning activities, as suggested by the (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017b).

### **Unity Activities Through Education in Malaysia and Its Importance**

Fostering the value of unity among students in Malaysia should be further strengthened through unity strategies and activities through education. Solidarity activities carried out in schools aim to inculcate values of patriotism among students Daud & Ishak (2022), producing pupils who can appreciate their own cultural heritage while respecting and appreciating the cultural heritage of other ethnicities. Solidarity activities in schools are also able to strengthen multi-ethnic student relationships further making students an individual with national awareness and identity. National identity is one of the aspirations of students in the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025 (MOE, 2017a).

There are various strategies of fostering unity through education which has been stated by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in PPPM 2013-2025. Among the efforts undertaken by the MOE include i: curriculum and teaching materials representing various ethnicities and races; ii: special modules of unity and virtues in Civic Education, History and KOMSAS Bahasa Melayu; iii: programme for the Integration of Pupils for Unity (RIMUP) and iv: construction of a school of insight (MOE, 2017a). One of the solidarity activities implemented in the school is through History education. History Education is taught to primary school pupils of level 2 and secondary school pupils. According to Zakaria et al (2012), the subject of History instills knowledge and appreciation of historical events in Malaysia in the soul of every student regardless of race. An appreciation of the country's history will produce citizens who seek to live in unity (Puteh, 2009 in Zakaria et al., 2012). Additionally, historical education is also important for fostering a spirit of unity Yong et al (2018); Naidu et al (2021) as historical education contains key content focused on the spirit of nationhood.

The literary component (KOMSAS) of the Malay Language covering verse, rhyme, poetry, short stories and gurindam is also a unity activity through education conducted in the classroom (Naidu et al., 2021). KOMSAS is a medium of learning for unity through its Malay literary elements. Malay literary elements introduced through KOMSAS are revealed to students regardless of religion, race and culture for them to understand and learn about Malay as the national language (Zakaria et al., 2012). Additionally, based on a study by Chew and Majelan (2019), there is a form 2 KOMSAS text that fosters unity and demonstrates elements of national integration such as advice verse and discretionary verse. The use of verse in

KOMSAS elements that demonstrate this element of national unity and integration indirectly introduces to students the concept of unity.

The Student Integration Plan for Unity (RIMUP) programme is among the action strategies by MOE (2017a) to instill a sense of belonging and solidarity among primary and secondary school students. Among the elements in the RIMUP programme implemented at the school include i : academic excellence programme; ii : sports and games activities; iii : festival and gathering activities; iv : visiting and camping activities and v : community service activities. Among the examples of academic excellence programmes are carnivals or language weeks involving the participation of all pupils regardless of race (Husin & Dawi, 2019; Hussien & Abdullah, 2018). The various types of competitions conducted in language weeks as well as the use of Malay as a language of communication can encourage all students to respect the national language further improving solidarity. However, based on a study by Hussien and Abdullah (2018), the language carnival programme carried out has not been able to attract the participation of students from among the Chinese.

According to a study conducted by Hussien and Abdullah (2018), sports and gaming are the top choices among Malay and Chinese students. These activities encompass cross-country sports, interethnic sports, and traditional games. Traditional games aim to introduce students to games specific to their respective cultures. Moreover, Naidu et al (2021) emphasized that cycling activities during the independence month showcase elements of unity. Enhancing racial interactions, unity through sports and games promotes collaboration and communication. Furthermore, students exhibit a higher interest in sports and gaming activities.

For festive and communal events within the RIMUP, students are encouraged to engage in activities that promote cultural diversity, such as feast days, National Days, Teachers' Day, and extracurricular events. Husin & Dawi (2019) suggest that patriotic song contests, a common feature of National Day celebrations in schools, can resonate well with students, fostering a sense of patriotism. Despite Seman et al (2015) findings indicating a modest level of student identification with national identity through patriotic songs, activities like multi-ethnic dance and music (Hussien & Abdullah, 2018) and pool competitions (Naidu et al (2021) during National Day have garnered positive responses from students of varied ethnic backgrounds. Notably, the Co-curriculum Day has been well-received by Malay and Chinese students, as highlighted by (Hussien and Abdullah, 2018).

Camping and touring activities can promote unity among students. Hussien and Abdullah (2018) found that camping and school visits can enhance relationships between Malay and Chinese students. These activities also offer students the chance to engage in cross-cultural experiences, immersing themselves in different cultural settings. This was further reinforced by a study of Naidu et al (2021) which stated that elements of unity can be seen in the activities of uniformed bodies assisted by the role of a teacher. While community service activities like gotong royong and volunteer work may be less appealing to Chinese students compared to Malay students (Hussien & Abdullah, 2018), they play a crucial role in nurturing well-rounded Malaysian citizens and should be continued.

In addition to promoting unity among primary and secondary school students through academic subjects and RIMUP activities, preschool children can also benefit from initiatives that encourage unity. A study by Ariff et al (2023) illustrated this point. Their examination of the Upin and Ipin animated series emphasized the introduction of multicultural festivals and the promotion of peaceful coexistence in society to young children. Using video animation as an educational tool effectively communicates values of unity to children. Furthermore,



incorporating Bahasa Melayu as the primary language in these animations can increase children's interest and understanding, bridging racial gaps and encouraging the use of the national language.

### **Fostering Concept of Unity Through Traditional Games**

In early childhood education, learning through play is a key method that aligns with child development and is detailed in KSPK (MOE, 2017b). It serves as one of the instructional approaches for preschoolers, allowing diverse learning content to be imparted to children, such as the idea of racial unity, through playful means. Play-based learning can be divided into distinct categories: independent games, guided games, and teacher-led games (Wickstrom et al., 2019). Hence, to illustrate the concept of unity, through the cultural heritage of Malaysia's different races can be showcased through traditional games. Furthermore, traditional games can indirectly enhance children's socio-emotional, physical, cognitive, and fine and gross motor development (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

Malaysia showcases a rich array of diverse traditional games, each unique to the various races and ethnicities within the country. These traditional games exhibit a wide range of gameplay styles and utilize materials such as wood, bamboo, or animal skin for their equipment (Yusoff et al., 2020). While many of these traditional games in Malaysia are designed for group participation, there are also solitary games that individuals can enjoy, as highlighted by (the Department of National Heritage, 2024). These games, passed down through generations, not only serve as recreational activities but also play a significant role in fostering social bonds and teaching valuable life skills.

Among the traditional games that hold national heritage status are Malay traditional games such as *congkak*, *gasing* and *ketinting* (Department of National Heritage, 2024). The Indian game of *kabaddi* was recognized as a national heritage in 2012 Department of National Heritage (2024), while the well-known traditional Chinese game in Malaysia is cheling or Chinese yoyo (Leng, 2019). Additionally, traditional games from Sabah and Orang Asli ethnicities, such as *rampanau* and *kerchang*, are also celebrated as part of Malaysia's traditional games that represent national pride. Each of these games showcases unique cultural elements that symbolize Malaysia's diverse ethnicities and can serve as a tool to promote unity among preschool children.

One of the most iconic traditional games in Malaysia is *congkak*, a game of strategy that involves a wooden board with rows of holes and seeds or marbles (Department of National Heritage, 2024). Players take turns to distribute these seeds into the holes, aiming to collect as many as possible in their storehouse. *Congkak* is not only a test of patience and foresight but also an educational tool, helping players improve their mathematical and strategic thinking skills. Another beloved game is *gasing*, which involves spinning tops made from wood or metal (Yusoff et al., 2020). Spinning tops, known as "gasing," are popular in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Melaka. They come in different types, such as Malay and Chinese *gasing*. *Gasing* can be played in two ways: by throwing to topple the opponent's top or by spinning against resistance (Department of National Heritage, 2024). In 2012, the *ketinting* game was designated as a national heritage. *Ketinting*, also known as *Teng Teng*, is a traditional outdoor game involving stones and *teng teng* frames on the ground. As stated by Kamaruddin et al (2021), *ketinting* is commonly played by girls due to its less challenging nature. However, engaging in physical game such as *ketinting* that involve children's movement can enhance their gross motor skills, particularly focusing on body balance and leg muscle strength.

Kabaddi on the other hand is a national heritage game of the Indian community in Malaysia that is not only played by Indians, but also by Chinese and Malays (National Department of Culture and Arts, n.d.). The game of kabaddi is played in groups and is played in an open area. This game requires a match between two groups, the attacking group and the defending group. The National Department of Culture and Arts (n.d.) stated that this game of kabaddi, which is played in groups, will foster team spirit and the sense of unity within the group. Patriotic spirit, appreciation of national integration and mutual respect can be fostered through this game. The Chinese yoyo game involves bells and ropes that are twisted and balanced on the ropes, as mentioned by (Leng, 2019). It can be played solo or in groups and is a favorite pastime among the Chinese community in Malaysia, especially during Chinese New Year festivities. Introducing children to this traditional game from another culture can broaden their horizons. Moreover, playing this game can enhance children's hand-eye coordination and concentration (Leng, 2019).

Traditional games offer numerous benefits to children across emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development aspects (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019). In a study by Mat Nayan and Kun (2019), it was also mentioned that 95% of children believe that traditional games contribute to enhancing cognitive, social and physical abilities. Moreover, as highlighted by Wijayanti (2014), engaging in traditional games can foster positive emotional and social growth, enhancing children's empathy and emotional regulation skills. These games also serve to acquaint children with the diverse cultures, histories, and traditions of Malaysian races (Nayan & Kun, 2019). Understanding Malaysian heritage can instill a sense of patriotism in children while promoting an environment of unity and harmony.

Despite the numerous advantages outlined, traditional games are currently experiencing a decline in popularity among today's generation. Children now prefer digital games and electronic devices over traditional games, as indicated by (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). Research by Zahari et al (2014) further supports this trend, revealing that modern games are more appealing to primary school students, with nearly half of them owning interactive devices. Moreover, the majority of these students are only familiar with congkak and batu seremban, lacking knowledge about other traditional games. A study conducted by Mat Nayan and Kun (2019) highlighted that not all children are familiar with traditional games indigenous to Malaysia.

## Conclusion

In summary, education plays a key role in introducing the idea of unity to students across all levels in Malaysia. The country has implemented various strategies and activities to promote unity, national identity, and patriotism among students. It is crucial to start fostering unity at a young age to ensure the development of a strong national identity in every Malaysian. Given children's natural inclinations, unity concepts should be integrated into activities like play-based learning, simulations, role-playing, and modern educational approaches. Traditional games, for instance, serve as a valuable tool to impart unity values and cultural heritage while benefiting children socially, physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Therefore, stakeholders must prioritize unity-building through education to maintain Malaysia's harmony and facilitate comprehensive human capital development.

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