

Integrating Traditional Costumes in Education to Foster National Unity Among Preschoolers

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Abstract

Malaysia, a vibrant nation located in Southeast Asia, is celebrated globally for its remarkable cultural diversity. Renowned for its rich cultural heritage, Malaysia remains focused on tackling the ongoing task of fostering national unity among its diverse racial communities. The education system, which ideally serves as a melting pot for the younger generation, has yet to fully capitalize on its potential to bridge racial divides and cultivate a unified national identity. Nurturing unity from a young age is a vital step towards building a more harmonious and inclusive society. Early childhood presents a unique window of opportunity to instill values of cooperation, understanding, and mutual respect among individuals. This foundational period is crucial because it is when children are most open and receptive to learning about the world around them and the diverse people within it. Hence, this concept paper discusses the incorporation of traditional costumes in education as an approach to introduce and nurture the unity concepts among preschoolers, with the relevance of Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory.

Keywords: Education, Preschoolers, Early Childhood Education, Traditional Costumes, National Unity

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has embarked on a journey to foster national unity among its diverse population, comprising various ethnic groups including the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples. Together, they enrich the colorful cultural tapestry of the nation. Therefore, national unity is an essential value that every Malaysian must uphold in one's heart in order to maintain our country's harmony and stability (Abdul Rahman et al., 2019). As a country with diverse ethnicities living in harmony, Malaysia has been a yard stick amongst nations around the world (Saat et al., 2021). Before being a multi-racial nation, Malays, the indigenous and original people are the native people living in Malaya. The arrival of the colonialists brought the immigrants from various parts of the world, notably from China, India, and other regions of Asia, significantly enriched the cultural and ethnic landscape of Malaysia. The Malaysian model underscores the importance of embracing diversity as a strength, rather than a division, demonstrating to the world that a plural society can indeed thrive on the principles of tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect.

National Unity in Malaysia – Issues and Challenges

National unity stands as a cornerstone in the development and prosperity of a nation. Unity helps to bridge the gaps between different segments of society, promoting social cohesion and harmony. However, achieving and maintaining national unity is not without its challenges. It requires continuous effort from both the government and citizens to nurture a sense of patriotism, respect for diversity, and a commitment to the common good. Failure in understanding the concepts of national unity and learning from the past will cause a nation to fall back into the arena of racial strife and riots that will not benefit but harm the country. The 13th of May 1969 marks a dark chapter in Malaysia's history, known for the racial riots that took place between the Malay and Chinese communities. This tragic event occurred in the aftermath of the general elections held on 10 May 1969, which saw significant political shifts and heightened ethnic tensions. The exact causes of the riot are complex and include political dissatisfaction, economic disparities between the ethnic groups, and a breakdown in communication and understanding (Ab Ghani et al., 2021). One of the significant outcomes of the riots was the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, aimed at promoting national unity through economic equality and eradicating poverty irrespective of race (Mamat et al., 2014). The NEP sought to improve the economic status of the *Bumiputera*, who were economically disadvantaged compared to the Chinese community. The dispute led to the establishment of the MAGERAN (*Majlis Gerakan Rakyat*), a significant move signalling the government's commitment to fostering a harmonious and balanced society. MAGERAN was tasked with overseeing the implementation of policies and initiatives that would bridge socio-economic disparities among Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups (Ab Ghani et al., 2021). The discussions and deliberations on how best to administer and realize the aspirations of the New Economic Policy catalyzed the creation of the *Rukun Negara* in 1970, a foundational national philosophy designed to unite the country's multi-ethnic population. The *Rukun Negara* was conceived as a set of principles to instill a patriotic spirit among Malaysians and to guide the nation towards greater unity. It emphasized beliefs in God, loyalty to King and country, the supremacy of the Constitution, the rule of law, and good behaviour and morality (Mohamad et al., 2021). Through these principles, the *Rukun Negara* aimed to promote a shared national identity and mission, bridging differences in ethnicity, culture, and religion.

The education system plays a crucial role in shaping the minds and attitudes of future generations, making it a powerful platform for promoting unity. However, various issues within the education system often hinder this potential. Critics claim that vernacular schools promote ethnic segregation by dividing children based on language from a young age (Hie et al., 2021). Vernacular school system prevents students from different ethnic backgrounds from mixing, thereby hindering the development of mutual understanding and shared national identity. School serves as is an institution that plays important role in fostering the spirit of patriotism among students through various educational programs, activities, and the curriculum (Naidu et al., 2021). Apart from that, a study done by Hie and Ku Samsu (2019) found that teachers' attitudes can significantly influence the formation of ethnic unity in schools. When teachers exhibit negative attitudes, particularly those that may be racially biased, the consequences can extend far beyond the classroom, potentially fostering racism among students. *Bahasa Melayu*, as the national language, is more than just a medium of communication; it is a symbol of national identity and unity. However, the neglect of *Bahasa Melayu* in educational settings has significant implications for national unity and cultural

identity in Malaysia. Also, teachers having low awareness about unity leads to the absence of discussions about unity in a classroom setting. To bridge this gap, it's essential for educators to seek out resources and training that can enhance their understanding of unity and how to incorporate it into their teaching.

Education As a Medium for National Unity

The education system is an important instrument in nation building of a country. School is not just a place for learning, but it serves as a platform to deliver the concept of nationality and instill moral values in support of government's aspiration to achieve national unity (Jamaluddin, 2011). It is essential that our education system is designed to be inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, this system must be flexible and adaptable to cater to the diverse needs of a student from different backgrounds. Ultimately, an education system that caters to the requirements of a multi-cultural society improves students' learning journeys and promotes unity and harmony in the community.

The inauguration of the National Education Philosophy (NEP) is implemented as a result of the racial tensions occurred in the past, caused by several factors including the dissatisfaction towards the injustice in rights to education (Che Awang & Tayeb, 2022). Education in Malaysia, based on NEP, encompasses a dynamic and holistic approach designed to cultivate individuals into well-rounded members of society. This system, deeply rooted in the belief of developing a harmonious and balanced person, emphasizes not just intellectual growth, but also spiritual, emotional, and physical development. Essentially, this philosophy stresses the importance of faith and obedience to God, shaping the educational path towards nurturing individuals who excel academically while also upholding strong moral and spiritual values (Ministry of Education, n.d.). According to *Aspirasi Sistem Pendidikan Perpaduan in Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025* PPPM 2013-2025), interactions that occur within the school environment help students to learn the values of empathy, cooperation, and tolerance toward different cultures and backgrounds. Looking into this potential, the Ministry of Education aims to generate an education system with the objective of strengthening the unity of Malaysians towards building a more cohesive and harmonious society (Ministry of Education, 2020). *Aspirasi Murid* strives for mastery in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and official language of Malaysia, hence acting as a unifying bridge among its diverse populations. *Identiti Nasional* in PPPM 2013-2025 asserts that the development of a strong national identity in Malaysia is deeply intertwined with the appreciation and adherence to the *Rukun Negara*. The journey towards achieving a cohesive national identity is not merely about tolerating differences but embracing and valuing them. Our country has enjoyed independence for 67 years, however racial issue is still a challenge faced by Malaysians and national leaders. However, the education system in our country has not yet succeeded in fostering racial unity in our country (Zulkipli, 2019). One of the factors leading to this issue is the vernacular school system, where students are segregated according to their respective ethnicities at the primary and secondary school levels. Although the vernacular school system was found to be an obstacle to our national unity in Malaysia, the *Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan* (RIMUP) was implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as an effort to foster the spirit of unity among students (Hie et al., 2021). This program is conducted at the primary and secondary school levels. Based

on the finding of the study done by Nor Farina Zulkipli in a primary school, the implementation of RIMUP had shown a positive impact on the students (Zulkipli, 2019). The integration of multi-racial students of the school is achieved through the five out of six RIMUP activities conducted by the school, in regards to the aspects of academic excellence, extracurricular, sports and games, patriotism and community service. RIMUP activities that can be implemented by schools are Independence Day celebration, debate, choral speaking and poetry reading. All these activities focus on the values of patriotism, culture and citizenship, especially during the celebrations of National Day and Malaysia Day and other main festivals in Malaysia. According to Che Awang and Tayeb (2022), the activities are carried out in schools in order to meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, it is imperative that RIMUP must be practised with full support and dedication of the teachers and school administrators to uphold the objectives of the National Education Philosophy (NEP).

Besides RIMUP, *Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan* which was re-introduced in the curriculum in June 2019 and History subject have been highlighted in both primary and secondary school syllabus as a proactive measure by Ministry of Education (Naidu et al., 2021). These two subjects encompass important values in nation building and the spirit of patriotism which contributes towards national unity among students. Currently, *Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan* is taught once in a month and through five main subjects in school which are *Bahasa Melayu*, English, History, Islamic Education and Moral Education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). *Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan* focuses on four main values: love, respect, joy and responsibility. *Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan* is seen as a less popular subject although it is an important medium to instill basic civility amongst students. The teachers have expertise in the subject area, however intensive courses and ongoing training process should be provided to better equip the teachers on current strategy and method of delivery in class (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). In History, according to a study conducted by Nair and Sinasamy (2017), it is found that students with high level of interest in the subject have high scores in patriotism. Hence, it is the teacher's role to uplift the interest and understanding of students towards History as it would help in enhancing the level of patriotism among the students. The use of technology in History class could enhance students' interest in learning the subject (Kaviza et al., 2018).

Hence, we could see such initiatives implemented by Ministry of Education to foster unity among students are being emphasized not from the grass root level (preschool). Nurturing the value of unity should be included in the preschool educational programmes if we desire to achieve our goals in national unity. A proverb in the Malay language which goes "*melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya*" appropriately summed up the latter, which conveys the importance of early guidance and nurturing. However, at the preschool level, it merely depends on teachers' creativity to create lesson plans and carry out activities related to the concept of national unity based on the content standards and learning standards in the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (KSPK). The contents of KSPK document consist of six learning strands: communication; spirituality, attitudes and value; personal competence; physical development and aesthetic; science and technology; and humanity (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Spirituality, attitude and values, humanity and personal competence strands are integrated in classroom teaching and preschool activities outside the classroom to nurture the concepts of unity among preschoolers. For instance, three of the objectives outlined upon completion of learning activities in the humanity strand

are pupils to be proud of the identity and uniqueness of the country, respect the cultural heritage of the various communities in Malaysia and respect the global society. These three objectives become the basis for the formation of unity among preschoolers as they learn to have mutual appreciation towards the differences in our multi-racial society.

Traditional Costumes in Malaysia

We wear clothes to project an image of what we represent. In Malaysia where many races live together, each day we can see various types of clothes worn by different people. Particularly, we have three primary ethnic societies, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Their distinct differences are reflected in their languages, dress standards, traditions and patterns of conduct (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022).

Malay, Chinese and Indian have their own unique traditional clothing in which people can easily recognize their ethnicities. Malay women clothing is influenced by Malay culture and religion (Na'am et al., 2019). Malay women wear '*tudung*' and '*baju kurung*', a loose-fitting tunic over a long skirt ('*sarung*'). The women's complete attire includes a long dress ('*kurung*' / '*kebaya*'), '*sarung*', and '*selendang*' (shawl). These outfits portray the practice of Islam and femininity in Malay society. In literal context, '*baju kurung*' means to cover '*aurat*', the body parts which are prohibited to be exposed as mentioned in Islamic teaching. Meanwhile, Malay men wear '*baju Melayu*', which has two versions: '*baju Melayu teluk belanga*' and '*baju Melayu cekak musang*'. Malay men's complete ensemble consists of a shirt, trousers, '*samping*', cloth belt and the '*tengkolok*' (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). '*Samping*' (waist cloth) is worn outside '*baju Melayu*', hanging waist down to the knee like a skirt, signifying modesty (Ismail, 2006). According to the Malay-Riau custom, people can identify a man's social position by his style of kain samping (waist cloth). For instance, young Malay men wear their '*samping*' short, with two fingers or a palm width above the knees, while married Malay men wear their '*samping*' on their knees (Aziz, 2009). These various ways of wearing Malay attire are known as non-verbal communication in Malay culture (Aris et al., 2020). Both '*baju Melayu*' and '*baju kurung*' are known as the formal attire of the Malays. Also, the basic pattern of the Malay clothing is often maintained for the Malay bride and groom.

Traditionally, Malaysian Chinese costume reflects Chinese culture in Mainland China. Meanwhile, the Peranakan Chinese costume has the Malay influence as they have been living with the Malay community for decades (Ahmad et al., 2011). One of the traditional costumes of Chinese is Cheongsam, worn by the ladies. Cheongsam has an extensive collar with button on the shoulders, slits on the both sides and is bodily-shaped. It is often made from silk, satin or soft-textured cloths (Yahya & Yaacob, 2020). The original ankle-length Cheongsam is later shortened to the knee length through time. Cheongsam can be seen worn during Chinese New Year festival and special occasions. Additionally, black and white colours are prohibited as the colours are believed to bring bad luck (Jasiman & Hj Semat, 2001). As for men, they wear a long robe made out of silk from the mainland China with bright-coloured, gold and silver brocade (Yahya & Yaacob, 2020). Samfu is also worn as formal attire particularly during wedding ceremonies (Seong, 2015). Samfu is a hip-length jacket with an outer flap fastening over to the right side, paired with loose-fitting trousers (Garret, 1991). According to Gumulya & Octavia, Peranakan Chinese women wear '*baju kurung*' with batik cloth as the '*sarung*', which is later modified '*baju panjang*' with central opening (2017). Later, '*baju panjang*' is further modified into a shortened version called '*kebaya*' and '*kebaya nyonya*'. '*Kebaya Nyonya*' is usually worn by married and elderly

Peranakan Chinese women. As for Indian, the women wear Saree, an unstitched long piece of cloth, portraying the meaning of Sanskrit word 'sati' (Kaur & Agrawal, 2019). Made from various fabrics such as silk, cotton, georgette, and chiffon, a saree is typically five to nine yards in length. Hence, it is adjustable to drape in over a hundred different ways which makes it a versatile unstitched garment. Meanwhile, the Salwar-Kurti is a stitched garment comprises a pair of loose-fitting baggy style trousers that tightens at the ankles (salwar), a tunic (kameez) or a loose-fitting short top up to hip length or slightly below (kurta or kurti) and a rectangle thin scarf (dupatta). Indian men wear dhoti, a single piece of rectangular unstitched fabric which covers only the lower part of body; knotted around the waist and is wrapped around the waist and legs (Indraganti et al., 2016). We can find dhotis normally in white, beige or light colours. Dhotis are worn along with full-sleeved or half-sleeved kurtis to cover the upper body.

Integrating Traditional Costumes in Preschool Education for Unity

In regard to *Aspirasi Sistem Pendidikan Perpaduan*, it is an aspiration of our Ministry of Education to build a system with the purpose to assimilate unity among Malaysians (Ministry of Education, 2020). In order to achieve the achieving the ultimate goal, the value of unity should be instilled from the early stages of education (Mat Daud & Ishak, 2022). Hence, *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (JPNIN) took an initiative by establishing *Tabika Perpaduan* since 1976 under *Rancangan Perhubungan Masyarakat, Lembaga Perpaduan Negara, Jabatan Perdana Menteri* (Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, n.d.). *Pelan Pendidikan Awal Kanak-Kanak Tabika Perpaduan 2021-2030* is introduced by Ministry of National Unity (KPN,) with the aim to strengthen the role of *Tabika Perpaduan* as an early childhood education institution that is able to nurture patriotism and moral values among the preschool students. However, this initiative has to be supported with suitable elements due to the abstract nature of the values and unity concept itself among children.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, made groundbreaking contributions to understanding children's cognitive development. His theory of representation is a core aspect of his comprehensive work, emphasizing how children learn to mentally represent the world around them. This process is crucial for their cognitive development and plays a significant role in how they learn to think, solve problems, and understand concepts. Piaget identified several stages of cognitive development, with the development of representational thought marking a significant transition (Piaget, 1978). Before children develop this ability, they rely on sensory experiences and motor actions to interact with their environment, a stage Piaget termed 'sensorimotor' (birth to approximately 2 years old). As they progress, they begin to form mental representations of objects and events, which allows them to think about things that are not immediately present and engage in symbolic play, language development, and problem-solving. This marks the emergence into the 'preoperational' stage of development, which typically occurs from ages 2 to 7 (Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022). The theory of representation underlines the importance of symbolic thought, where children start to use symbols, such as words or images, to represent objects and events. This ability is foundational for later cognitive skills, including reading, mathematics, and critical thinking.

Traditional costumes serve as powerful symbols that represent the history, culture, and values of an ethnic group. They are more than just attire; they are a visual language that

conveys a wealth of information about one's heritage, social status, and community ties. In the context of Piaget's theory, these costumes can be seen as concrete symbols in the preoperational stage, where children begin to understand the world through symbols and mental images (Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022). Besides that, traditional costumes promote a sense of belonging and pride among members of an ethnic group, while also fostering respect and appreciation among those from different backgrounds. In a multi-cultural country, the diversity of traditional costumes worn during cultural festivals or national celebrations denotes the harmonious blend of cultural diversity in Malaysia (Hussien & Abdullah, 2018). This aligns with Piaget's views on the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that the sharing and celebrating of cultural symbols like traditional costumes can enhance mutual understanding and cohesion among a nation's diverse population.

Hence, teachers indeed play a pivotal role in introducing and educating students about traditional costumes and their significance. By incorporating these elements into their curriculum or extracurricular activities, teachers not only widen their students' perspectives on cultural differences but also instill a sense of cultural pride and identity among them, which ultimately promote the understanding of unity concept. Apart from that, integrating traditional costumes in classroom activities can be a dynamic and interactive way to engage students (Hie et al., 2018). For example, during cultural festivals, teachers can organize a 'Cultural Day' where students are encouraged to wear traditional costumes and share stories about their cultural significance. This not only makes learning fun and engaging but also allows students to express their heritage and learn about the customs and traditions of their peers. Such activities can significantly enhance students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, promoting empathy and social harmony.

Conclusion

Children possess natural openness and curiosity, making early childhood an ideal period to introduce the concept and values of unity. Hence, the education system plays a pivotal role in this endeavour. Schools and learning environments can implement programs and activities that promote teamwork, such as group projects that require cooperation, or cultural exchange days that celebrate and educate about the diversity within the classroom. Through these experiences, children learn the differences that exist within the multi-cultural community, fostering a sense of unity. Clothing, as a universal element of daily life, holds a unique power in its ability to communicate identity, culture, and values. Through colours, patterns, and designs, traditional costumes portray cultural values of an ethnicity. Integrating traditional costumes into educational settings or community activities provides children with a hands-on opportunity to explore and understand the varied cultural backgrounds that make up their community.

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