

Why parents choose: An ethnographic study into the factors affecting school choice in peninsular Malaysia.

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Introduction

The opening line of the Malaysian Government's Education Act (1996: 11) posits that “knowledge is the key determinant of the destiny and survival of the nation.” Malaysia is currently caught in a ‘middle-income trap’ characterised by declining quality of human capital, a stagnating level of income and a decreasing competitiveness with its Asian neighbours. As a result the country has increasingly emphasised education as a means of advancement (Hock & Nagaraj, 2012: 213). This report investigates the decision making process of parents in the Segamat district of Southern peninsula Malaysia to determine the factors considered when making choices about their child’s education. It is this initial decision that plays a significant role in shaping the foundation for children to determine their own future and to promote broader prosperity and development outcomes (Krueger & Lindahl, 2001; Hock & Nagaraj, 2012).

The first section of this paper outlines the historical events that have shaped the contemporary structure of the education system in Malaysia. The paper subsequently draws upon existing literature from Malaysian Studies, Sociology, and Anthropological disciplines to highlight the current understanding of parental education decision-making. The study used qualitative research methods of focus groups, and small-group and individual interviews to gather data focussed on attitudes towards access to, and quality of, schooling and education, to further understand the perceptions towards education in Malaysia. The final sections of the paper present the key findings of the research, and concludes that ultimately, ethnicity is the dominant influence in determining educational choice.

Historical Background

The British arrival in 1786 soon led to the establishment of an education system that was logistically easy to manage for the colonial power, yet resulted in major complexities in Malaysia’s social structure. Schools that taught in english catered to

urban non-Malays and the Malay elites, Malay schools catered to the general local population, and the Chinese and Tamil schools catered to migrant workers from China and India. Plans for independence emphasised the need to promote national unity through an education that brought the different ethnicities together.

The issue of language of instruction quickly emerged and proved an insurmountable obstacle in this pursuit of collaboration. The first proposal with English as the language of instruction led to strong opposition from Malay nationalists. In turn, the use of Bahasa Malay and English as principal languages of instruction led to protests from the Chinese. Ultimately, the use of Bahasa Malay as the main medium of instruction was endorsed in National Schools whilst allowing the Chinese and Indian students to continue learning in their own language (Hill, Tham & Haji Mat Zin, 2012).

The different ethnic schools allowed parents multiple options in the selection of their child's schooling. However, this led each school having a majority of only one ethnic group, limiting social interaction across ethnicities. According to Weiss & Welsh (2015) the Bumiputera group was considered disadvantaged in Malaysia, which led to the establishment of special schools to cater to the well performing Bumiputera students. Furthermore, the matriculation examination was implemented specifically to select students for admission into public universities. From 1979 to 2002 a quota system was enforced, ensuring a minimum amount of Bumiputera students are admitted to university. This was done by using the SPM examination as a tool for admission for Bumiputera students and the STPM examination for the non-Bumiputera students (See Table 1). This was a highly controversial issue due to the unequal difficulty of the examinations (Lim 2013).

School	Age	Major Examination
Kindergarten	4-6	X
Primary school	7 (Year 1) 8 (Year 2) 9 (Year 3) 10 (Year 4) 11 (Year 5) 12 (Year 6)	UPSR
Secondary school	13 (Form 1) 14 (Form 2) 15 (Form 3) 16 (Form 4) 17 (Form 5)	PMR (Further to art/science) SPM
High school	18-19 (Form 6) - 2 years 18 (Matriculation) - 1 year 18-21 (College) - 3-4 years	STPM (Further to government university with score of more than 3.0) Diploma/Certificate
University	19/20	Degree (3-4 years)

Table 1 - shows the Malaysian education structure from K-13 (Weiss & Welsh 2015).

Contemporary Context

The education structure in Malaysia is from Kindergarten to year 13 is shown in Table 1. With six years of primary, three secondary, and four upper secondary which include two years of pre-university. At the end of each level of schooling, a major national examination is undertaken by the students (highlighted in bold in Table 1). Only the SPM and STPM are selective exams, SPM for entrance to pre-university programmes and STPM for entrance to university (MoE 2012).

By the year 2020 and under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), Malaysia hopes to increase its gross national income per capita from US\$10,000 to US\$15,000. Central to this economic growth is the emphasis on education, which is clearly demonstrated by the heavy investment in the sector (PEMANDU 2010). According to the report by the ETP, in 2011 alone, 3.8 percent of the country's gross domestic product was spent on education. The five system aspirations for Malaysian education are access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency as stated by the NEB National education blueprint (MoE 2012).

The ethnic demography of the Segamat district remains approximately consistent with Malaysia's ethnic demographic as a whole. The ethnic breakdown is as follows: 67.4 percent Malay/Bumiputera, 24.6 percent Chinese, 7.3 per cent Indian/Tamil and 0.7 percent are classified as others (Department of Statistics Malaysia July 2011).

Literature Review

Literature suggests that there are four key factors specific to Malaysia that influence parents' decision-making: language of instruction, school-ethnicity, school quality, and considerations of employability. Language is a crucial factor in school selection (Lee 2015: 303). The current education system is featured by two different types of public primary schools; national schools that use Bahasa Malay as the language of instruction, and national-type primary schools that teach in Mandarin or Tamil. All public secondary instruction is in Bahasa Malay with English as a secondary language (Lee 2015: 305). Additionally, there are Chinese independent secondary schools using Mandarin, state religious schools in Arabic and Bahasa Malay, as well as private and international schools teaching in English (Lee 2015: 303). For an overview of schools and languages, see table 2.

School Type	Language of Instruction
National schools (Public)	Bahasa Malaysian
National-type primary schools	Chinese or Tamil
Chinese Independent secondary	Chinese
Private and International	English
State religious schools	Arabic and Bahasa Malaysian

Table 2. School types in Malaysia and language of instruction (Weiss & Welsh, 2015)

The language factor is intrinsically tied to ethnicity. Chinese students attending public secondary schools are forced to adopt a new language of instruction and are therefore placed in a disadvantaged position relative to their peers. High dropout rates indicate that these students struggle with this change. Furthermore, Bumiputera students born after 1954 are more likely to proceed to secondary school (Hock & Nagaraj, 2012: 222). Parents take these conditions into consideration when choosing a primary school.

Malaysian schools are highly homogenised; 90 percent of Chinese attend Mandarin schools, 50 per cent of Indians frequent Tamil schools and National schools are the institution of choice for Bumiputera students (Lee, 2015: 303) (Hock & Nagaraj, 2012: 221). Statistics taken from the Yellavia directory report that out of the total of 37 schools in the Segamat district; 4 are Tamil; 9 are Chinese and 24 are Malay (Rendah, 2016).

In general schools follow a standardised syllabus and thus have only a small degree of autonomy over subject matter however, perceptions of differences in quality is another factor influencing parental decision making. The education system is highly centralised; the Ministry of Education controls education policies, expenditure, curriculum, recruitment and training (Lee, 2015: 307). The PISA study conducted in 2012 reveals that private schools tends to offer higher quality education. The results remain significant after accounting for students' economic, social and cultural status

(OECD, 2012). Private education is expensive in Malaysia and so cost may be a barrier hindering access for some Malaysians. The proportion of students enrolled in private schools remains low at 2 percent (Lee, 2015: 303).

Considerations of employability also impact parents' decisions. Research shows that employers tend to prefer graduates from private universities due to their ability to speak English fluently. At the same time there is an increasing demand for private tertiary education and growing enrolment in private tertiary institutions with English as principal language of instruction. As previously highlighted tertiary enrolments are strongly determined by ethnicity. Since Bumiputera students are provided with easier access to public higher education, public institutions feature a largely Malay student-body whereas private tertiary students are mostly non-Bumiputera (Lee, 2015: 303). Consequently there is growing unemployment among Bumiputera graduates who have been exclusively taught in Bahasa Malay (Hock & Nagaraj, 2012: 224).

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate the factors that influence parents decisions concerning their children's schooling and whether reasoning differs between population groups.

Specific objectives to be achieved:

- ❖ Identify factors contributing to primary school selection.
- ❖ Establish a hierarchy of the relative importance of each factor.
- ❖ Establish the characteristics that contribute towards perceptions of school quality.
- ❖ Determine whether the process, factors and barriers differ between settlement areas.
- ❖ Determine whether the process, factors and barriers differ between ethnic groups

Methodology

Approach

The study adopted an open-minded approach to research. Questions were posed in a manner to ensure that researchers' prior knowledge and preconceived understandings did not influence participants' responses. This outlook reflects an iterative process where answers generated would then shape the future direction of the research. The first stage of data collection was strategically used to narrow the focus of the study before entering into the second stage of data collection (Bissell et al., 2000: 173). The study used qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis.

Sampling

The study adopted a selected sampling approach with eight distinct groups targeted by partners at the South East Asia Community Observatory (SEACO) to provide a range of demographic communities that varied by geographic location, ethnicity, and gender. Two sessions were conducted in each of the selected sub-districts of Segamat. Parents with children in kindergarten were chosen as participants given the assumption that this section of the population would be in the process of determining a school for their children. Once data collection was underway it was clear that participants did not all fulfill this strict criteria but rather, came from many population cohorts ranging from newlyweds through to grandparents. However the majority of the sample had children already in primary school. As a result, participants were reflecting upon a past decision or contemplating an active one.

This diversity necessitated a flexible approach to data collection to assure that questions were relevant to participants. The sample body was biased towards female and Malay participants: only 13 percent of participants were men, and only 19 percent were either Indian or Chinese. This unbalanced representation of ethnicity and gender clearly affected the process of data collection in terms of the direction of questions and subsequently impacted upon the results.

First stage of data collection

The first stage of data collection involved conducting focus groups with Malay women and men who had been selected from three distinct sub-districts within the Segamat district. The homogenous ethnicity of participants was conducive to the use

of focus groups with the hope that participants would be open to sharing their perceptions towards schooling and education (Alexander & Korpela, 2012). The data collection was structured around two central activities;

Activity 1: Participants were asked to discuss 4-5 factors that they held to be most important in choosing a primary school for their child, and to write them down in collaboration on cards. They were then asked to order the factors from most important to least important and discussion was facilitated around why they had decided on that particular order.

Activity 2: Participants were split into groups of 2-3 and were asked to draw a mind map focusing on the central concept of quality, and what the concept meant to them in relation to education.

These activities were specifically designed to enable the collection of a broad spectrum of data without prompting responses as a result of the researcher's position. This was ensured by the autonomy participants were given in selecting factors they thought critical to school choice. The data was analysed to discover the primary patterns that presented across the focus groups and drawn upon to direct the primary line of investigation that would be taken in the second part of the data collection (Bissell et al., 2000: 173). The analysis of this initial data was also used as a tool in shaping the design of the questions used in the one-on-one and small-group interviews.

Second stage of data collection

The second stage of data collection took the form of small-group and one-on-one interviews. This change in method was designed to reflect the change in composition of the participant groups and also a narrowing of the research focus. The sixth and seventh participant groups were the only ones that included Indian and Chinese community members, it was therefore crucial to gather as much detailed data as possible from these few participants to ensure their adequate representation. The activities that were conducted initially in the focus groups were reintroduced in the interviews as a means to ensure rigor by cross-checking results returned by these participants.

It is important to acknowledge the impact of the researcher's position as a direct influence upon interactions with participants and consequently the data collected. Our status as outsiders in the Malaysian community doubtlessly had an impact upon the information, attitudes and responses generated from our participants. Furthermore, our inherent Western perspective, and ideologies have shaped the interpretation of the findings.

Findings

This study investigates the factors that influence parents decisions concerning their child's school choice. The qualitative research methods of focus groups, interactive group activities, small group interviews and one-on-one interviews were effective in obtaining data from the varying ethnicities and family compositions. Data was analysed using mind-mapping, coding, and charting techniques. Several patterns emerged. (1) listed factors could be broadly divided into two groups; practical barriers including cost of the school and distance from home to school, and perceptions of quality including experience of teachers and number of available extra-curricular activities. (2) individual factors identified were consistent throughout the groups, regardless of their geographic location or ethnicity. (3) there was not a clear hierarchisation of factors overall (4) ethnicity of the school was not clearly identified as a conscious factor influencing decision making.

Practical factors

Group collaboration activities were initiated in order to find the general factors that influenced, or controlled, parents decisions regarding which school they chose for their children. Across all focus groups the following factors were discussed by participants as the most critical in their considerations of schooling choices:

- ❖ income and the cost of the school
- ❖ the number of children they had
- ❖ the distance to school from home and work
- ❖ time management with working hours and stay at home duties
- ❖ the social and physical environment of the school
- ❖ the school syllabus
- ❖ the quality of the school and teachers

- ❖ access to transportation

Betty mentioned that “safety is important, schools needs gates and need to be away from main roads. It is also important to have a clean and tidy classroom.” Amanda highlighted that “as a working mum, flexibility with pick-up times is an important consideration for selecting a school.” Although there were other factors mentioned during this activity, such as the availability of food and drink, these were factors that applied to just one participant and were lowly prioritised relative to those listed above. It is clear that these factors are not specific to Malaysian society but rather are universal in application. This idea was further reinforced as their identification did not vary between ethnic groups or between geographical locations.

Quality

Activity 2 focused on the participants’ perception of quality education or schooling. Participants regularly used the word “quality” to describe the decisions they made in terms of their schooling preference for their children. This activity enabled understanding of the term ‘quality’ as:

- ❖ experience and qualification of teachers
- ❖ syllabus
- ❖ school results
- ❖ school environment
- ❖ extra-curricular activities
- ❖ safety
- ❖ discipline
- ❖ teacher-student relationships
- ❖ teacher-parent relations
- ❖ school equipment and facilities

Many Malaysian women in the large focus groups understood that private education was higher in quality due to these factors, however, it was too expensive to send their children through these schools. Jane for example indicated that “private education has a more complete curriculum and is more detailed in each subject area. Teachers are more qualified and experienced and the pupil to teacher ratio is lower. I would prefer

to send my child there but it is too expensive.” This reveals that even though quality was perceived as important, the factor of income constrained their choice. This highlights that despite the relevance of quality factors, the factors of practicality were more critical.

In a separate rural location Malaysian participants were constrained to the one (public) school. However, as a group, they did not desire private education. Brian mentioned that “the syllabus is the same, city schools might get slightly better results but it is not that important.”

Overall, the perceptions of quality as highlighted above, did not necessarily differ between geographic locations or between the different ethnic groups.

Ethnicity

Participants did not explicitly mention ethnicity as a factor influencing their decision despite it featuring prominently in the literature. It became clear that there was an assumption that children would attend schools consistent with their ethnicity. When the factor was raised in discussion, participants referred to its impact in terms of language of instruction, and religion/culture rather than using the word ‘ethnicity’. Evidence of the importance of ethnicity is detailed below in table 3.

	Malaysian	Chinese	Indian
Language	<p>"students would be weaker compared to Chinese students. They do not speak Mandarin well enough"</p> <p>"learning in English for math, science is not good; we already have an English subject and it makes it difficult to help children at home"</p>	<p>"learning Chinese is the most important language because children can learn Malay and English later"</p> <p>"going to university in Singapore costs the same as private universities here, and they speak the same language there"</p>	<p>Would not send children to Chinese primary school because they cannot speak Chinese.</p> <p>"Tamil language first, then they can mingle"</p>
Religion/ Culture	<p>"There should be a stronger emphasis on religious content in the syllabus. Religious education is most important. Because religion is present in everyday life"</p> <p>Would not send children to Chinese kindergarten because of food: they worry about food being non halal</p>	<p>"Buddhist institutions came to our school once a week on a Friday for an hour to teach us"</p>	<p>W. sent her five children through Tamil schooling for "respect of her religion"</p> <p>"Culture is important"</p>

Table 3 - Evidence of ethnicity described in terms of language, religion and culture.

It is evident that the majority of participants would send their children to a school with the language of instruction the same as their mother tongue. This finding supports Lee's suggestion (2015: 303) that language of instruction is one of the

crucial factors in school selection. Even in cases where participants believed learning another language was important, parents elected to enrol their children in additional classes rather than send their child to a school of that language of instruction. These classes were additional only and did not overshadow their native language that was spoken in the home or at school.

There was only one case where a participant sent their child to a school with the language of instruction differed to their ethnicity. Sarah, an Indian mother, sent her daughter to a private Chinese kindergarten. For her, Mandarin was vital for her child's social well-being, education and future. In this case the different language of instruction was seen as desirable. Beyond English, Mandarin was viewed by some Malaysian and Indian participants as vital for their child's ability to secure a job in the future. There was a perception by these participants that it was advantageous to learn Mandarin due to a belief that the Chinese community dominates the Malaysian economy. Mandarin was similarly seen as helpful for social cohesion between children. However, this view was not common.

The divisions between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera populations were clear when discussing potential changes to the education system. Where Malay participants highlighted adjustments within the ethnically demarcated structure, non-Malays stressed the need to remedy the inherent inequalities. There was a strong dissatisfaction concerning access to high education and the quota system which limited the ability of Chinese and Indian to enter public universities. Joanne proposed that "every child must learn the three major Malaysian languages so that everyone is the same." Alice mentioned that "the quota system should be scrapped entirely in favour of access judged exclusively upon merit."

Further findings reveals an exceptional circumstance where the sample included two single mothers for whom the factors of practicality (such as distance and income), were far more crucial to them in their daily lives than any other factors.

Discussion

The findings in this report indicate that when Malaysians think about their social choices, their ethnicity exists as an underlying framework rather than a conscious

consideration. This plays out in the education sphere as when, for example, asked questions concerning distance, their response reflects not “this school is the closest,” but rather “this Malay/Chinese/Tamil school is the closest.”

“[Citizens] are daily reminded of their national place...however, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.”

Michael Billig (2015: 8)

While Billig’s assertion focuses on inter-state nationalism, in the Malaysian context his observation is equally applicable within the nation. The pervasive yet unconscious impact of ethnicity is so ingrained in Malaysian society that it exists as the most influential indicator of educational choices in the Segamat district of Southern Peninsula Malaysia. Existing literature suggests that the ethnicity factor is just one of a list that contributes towards parents’ decision-making however, the data suggests that its impact is distinct and more profound. In this way, the research has contributed to existing work by illustrating a clear dichotomous hierarchy in factors relating to school choice: there is an overarching and dominant impact of ethnicity, the specific practical and quality considerations fall beneath in a unique order depending on individual circumstances.

The broader implication of the data is that the uncontrollable aspect of ethnicity is the most defining feature of individual identity. Identity formation “takes place within...a ‘two social realities’ context: the ‘authority-defined’ social reality as laid out by members of the dominant power structure and the ‘everyday-defined’ social reality experienced in the course of normal life” (Shamsul and Athi 2015: 268). In the case of the Segamat district, the retention of colonial-era schooling system has normalised the ethnic stratification of the population and so led to the adoption of a social paradigm where sending a child to a primary school inconsistent with the child’s ethnicity is met with surprise. In this way the authority and everyday realities have imposed, and continue to reinforce the ethnic divisions that determines school choice.

The immediate consequence concerns whether Malaysian individuals face a future path that is pre-determined. Data reveals a clear frustration with a quota system that limits options for the non-Bumiputera population yet primary school segregation, albeit unofficial, does not face similar scrutiny. The question becomes: do individuals ultimately have control in determining their future outcomes? That is, is social structure more influential than individual agency? This idea reflects a broader frustration in Malaysian society as the top-down imposition of rules reflects a social rigidity. Concern around the link between education, social dissent and the government was clear in our discussion: Maria asked “is your data going to the Ministry of Education,” and expressed that “I don’t want them to know what I am saying.”

Exceptions to this general understanding included members from both the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera populations who were acutely aware of the impact of ethnicity upon future outcomes. Susan a Malay woman who spent 15 years working as a teacher, believed that “the quota system is unfair to Indian and Chinese families. We are very open-minded; we always discuss this in my family.” Gina, a young Indian lady who had experienced difficulty finding work, highlighted that “the system helps Bumiputera avoid the struggle.” These comments clearly reflect a deeper understanding of the education system. Rather than cast doubts over our findings these observations reinforce them; it is only through first hand experience that members of the population can critically engage with discussions about the structure of the system. To the average Malaysian these considerations are beyond the scope of their personal experience and as such they are unaware that their decisions take place within an ethnic framework.

While attempts were made to assure the quality of data through triangulation with research conducted on Sustainable Livelihoods in FELDA villages in the Segamat district, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the research; most significantly the composition of the sample. Sangasubana (2011: 567) highlights that ethnographers often face difficulties determining the amount of data to collect. In this case the sample overwhelmingly featured female members of the Malay community whereas male, Chinese and Indian participants were far less numerous. In order to ensure the integrity and credibility of data it would be advantageous to conduct

further research among the latter groups. Furthermore, participants were paid a small sum for their time which may have impacted upon research data. Boutis and Willison (2008: 46) highlight that financial incentives may lead to a sample favouring the economically disadvantaged including those for whom the questions are less relevant. To build on this research, it would be insightful to compare results from Segamat district with that of other districts. Further research should be done on including a greater diversity of participants to determine whether unconscious ethnicity is similarly underlying their education decisions. It would also be interesting to look at decision making in other social choices such as employment decisions to note if ethnicity is pervasive.

“Education plays a vital role in achieving the country’s vision of attaining the status of a fully developed nation in terms of economic development, social justice, and spiritual, moral and ethical strength, towards creating a society that is united, democratic, liberal and dynamic.”

Education Act 1996 (1996: 11)

While the Malaysian government clearly prioritises education as the key driver towards development however, rather than unify society the education system serves to compound divisions by perpetuating a structure that ensures that children identify with their ethnic group rather than a broader idea of being Malaysian. This primordial understanding of nationhood where ethnic identity is stressed as the unifying factor of nationality constrains the education system in achieving its aims and reflects a broader social frustration in individual’s ability to determine their futures (Cram 2009: 181).

Conclusion

This research confirms existing literature in identifying universal practical and quality-related factors that influence Malaysian parents’ education decisions for their children. It suggests however, that the impact of ethnicity needs to be reframed and emphasised as its unconscious impact upon social choices is pervasive and dominant. Parents do not make decisions in a vacuum rather, there is a societal assumption that children will attend a primary-school that is consistent with their ethnic heritage. The ‘active’ decision is specific to each family as the data illustrates that factors do not

reveal patterns dependent on geographic location, nor between ethnicity nor gender of participants.

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