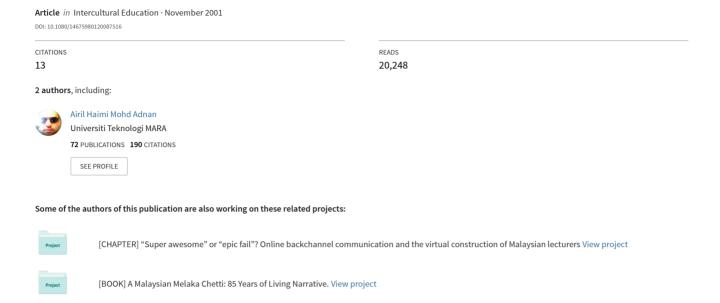# The social functions of education in a developing country: the case of Malaysian schools and the role of Malaysian teachers

**2 authors**, including:

Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan
Universiti Teknologi MARA

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# The social functions of education in a developing country: the case of Malaysian schools and the role of Malaysian teachers

AIRIL HAIMI ADNAN & EDWIN SMITH

ABSTRACT *Employing a social constructivist approach, this article discusses the social functions of education in a developing country, Malaysia. These social functions are discussed and a background of the country is provided before looking at three specific functions: developmental, identity and economic, and how they are actualised through schools. Both positive and negative aspects of the three functions are highlighted to provide a comprehensive understanding. The current state of the teaching profession is examined before the role of teachers in realising the three functions is discussed. It is proposed that teachers need to fulfil a moral purpose to contribute positively towards intercultural understanding, nation-building, and advancing society.*

ABSTRAK (Malay language) *Menggunakan pendekatan sosial-konstruktivis, artikel ini memperbincangkan fungsi-fungsi sosial pendidikan di sebuah negara membangun, Malaysia. Kesemua fungsi sosial itu diperjelaskan bersama latarbelakang negara Malaysia sebelum tiga fungsi spesifik iaitu pembangunan, identiti dan ekonomik ditinjau dengan lebih mendalam menerusi proses persekolahan. Aspek-aspek positif dan negatif ketiga fungsi ini telah ditinjau untuk pemahaman yang komprehensif. Perkembangan semasa profesion perguruan juga dikaji, bersama dengan peranan guru berkaitan dengan ketiga fungsi ini. Adalah dicadangkan yang para guru harus memegang peranan moral untuk menyumbang secara positif ke arah kefahaman antara-budaya, pembangunan negara dan demi memajukan masyarakat.*

## Introduction

If one mentions education and schools, usually a stereotypical "common sense" image comes to mind of "a child looking inquiringly from her work, eyes bright, wide open to the message of the teacher" (Brazier, 1999b, p. 7). The picture is undoubtedly one of hope and improvement, and this is what makes such portrayals of reality appealing to the common person. It should therefore not be surprising for

us to find a continuing global trend in which the political profile of educational issues has become more important, due partly to such images and the deeper meanings that they carry.

If one looks beneath this portrayal, however, the image is murkier. In addition to hope and improvement we can also discover gender inequality, racial discrimination, unjustified rationing of educational resources, etc. The United Nations, in a statement on global education trends, noted that in reality around 375 million children are still not attending school, some teachers are under siege from national governments and political leaders, and the global privatisation of education has undermined the classroom (Brazier, 1999b). There are various reasons for these trends. The most pertinent is that throughout the world, education is increasingly taken hostage by the instrumental needs of national economies, and in most countries education cannot help but be constrained by national cultures and dominant subcultures. In some countries education is also becoming synonymous with rigid standardised testing of cognitive performance, ignoring the positive functions that education could actively play in society and nation-building.

This article aims to unpack the education "construct", and critically examine those ways of thinking and acting embedded within it: first, by understanding how social scientists have managed to extract its functions within human societies; and second, by examining to what extent education in Malaysia has managed to actualise some of those functions through its school system and to what extent it has contributed to both society and the nation. Finally, the article considers what role teachers can play in helping to make that contribution, for better or for worse.

The term "construct" is employed here to emphasise that all facets of human life have been formulated and reformulated, reflecting both change and continuity, in any existing human society. We adopt this social constructionist approach to problematise common sense perceptions of what is normative. This is important because, as Clarke and Cochrane (1998) argue, social constructs are powerfully embedded or solidified as ways of thinking and acting in society that we begin to accept them as common sense, natural and unproblematic. We would argue that it is this socially constructed origin of education and its seemingly value-free nature that makes education within the context of a developing country such a difficult topic to examine.

## The Social Functions of Education

Formal education will always reflect the wider socio-cultural niche of its particular setting. These socio-cultural beginnings of education are self-evident because we all live in culturally mediated worlds, and culture is "the [only] universal, species-specific characteristics of homo-sapiens" (Cole, 1998, p. 11). It is due to the socio-cultural origins of education that social scientists have been able to extract some of its universally shared dimensions. Even though they work from within different traditions (Marxism, Liberalism, Interactionism, and others) social scientists are in agreement regarding one of those dimensions: the social functions of education.

From the work of different writers in a range of social scientific traditions, we have reformulated seven of the main social functions of education:

- developmental function: to ensure the development of cognitive potential towards an elevated state of living and modernity;
- political function: to sustain the current political system and maintain the status quo by ensuring loyalty to it;
- value function: to act as a medium of transmission for a particular society's norms and values;
- identity function: to create social solidarity towards nation-building by developing a sense of national identity;
- stratification function: to select the more able from the population as a whole, based on meritocratic principles;
- economic function: to prepare an educated workforce that can spur economic growth and bring wealth to the nation; and
- socialisation function: to become the main socialising agency, since parent(s) tend to work.

Though different functions might overlap in their definition and actualisation, certain functions are given a higher priority depending on the socio-cultural context, reflecting the dynamic and ever-changing nature of human societies. Furthermore, from these functions we could begin to envision the crucial role that the school as an institution plays in the formal process of education.

## Developmental, Identity and Economic Functions: the Malaysian context

We will focus on three social functions in this article, namely, the developmental function, the identity function and the economic function, all within the context of one developing country, Malaysia. These three functions are chosen because of the wealth of evidence available regarding the extent to which they have been actualised within the Malaysian education system through schools and schoolteachers. Ultimately, this enables us to gauge the contribution of those functions to Malaysia specifically and Malaysians in general.

Since its independence from colonial rule in 1957, Malaysia has been characterised by rapid modernisation and development. It is one of the newly emerging economic powerhouses in South East Asia, as illustrated by Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Demery and Demery (1992) observed that Malaysia managed to sustain a GDP growth of between 5 and 7% from the 1970s until the present. This has led Harber and Davies (1997) to classify Malaysia as a newly emerging industrialised economy, in terms of the direction of its economy and the technological level of its current industries. It should also be noted that vigorous industrialisation policies by the democratically elected government have turned Malaysia into a key global player in heavy industry. The country now exports automobiles, fabricated steel, electronic and computer components and various other industrial and consumer goods. This also reflects the government's hope to achieve full industrialisation by the year 2020. The country's economic growth is

also linked to rigorous economic reconstruction programmes at the societal level, partly because of major riots that took place in 1969. These were sparked by a feeling among the Bumiputeras (Malay majority) that they were disadvantaged and being left behind economically (Faaland *et al.*, 1990). Malaysia is a multicultural society made up of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian; as well as various other ethnic minorities and aboriginal groups. This diverse mix of different ethnicities, religions, cultures and languages is what makes Malaysia unique as a modern society and a developing nation.

Two years after the 1969 riots, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was enacted as a testament to the government's commitment to redress the economic imbalance. Programmes were introduced to help the disadvantaged majority Malays (a minority in terms of power) gain a larger slice of Malaysia's economic wealth. Consequently, until today, this strategy has been implemented despite the fact that some have argued that the NEP has created a rift between Malays in urban and rural settings. More importantly for our discussion, it is believed that Malaysia's economic miracle owes much to major changes that have been implemented in the Malaysian education system during the 43 years since independence. The Malaysian government has a firm belief in the power of education as a tool for development, reflected by the high proportion of public expenditure on education and health. The Third World Institute (1999) reports that in the past five years government spending on education and health care has risen to 48%, compared to 38% in the early 1990s. It is no surprise that with this belief in the power of education, Malaysia has been able to make considerable gains in several social areas, including developmental, identity-related and economic gains.

## The Developmental Function: including some or excluding others?

In terms of the developmental function, Malaysia rates favourably in what we would label the "global classroom". This is based primarily on achievements at the international level in secondary level science and mathematics, although the country is still far from the top three positions occupied by Singapore, Japan and South Korea (Brazier, 1999a). Outside of the classroom, with reference to the United Nations' "Human Development Index" (HDI), which (among other factors) examines access to education and levels of schooling in a given country (Crump & Ellwood, 1998), Malaysia ranks a favourable 60 out of 242 nations surveyed in the late 1990s, with an HDI score of 0.832. So, it could be argued that the national educational philosophy is successful in developing students' academic abilities and in providing equal access to primary and secondary schools. It is also noteworthy that the education system has managed to reduce illiteracy to approximately 7% of the population since Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule in 1957 (Third World Institute, 1999). In fact, Malaysians are generally able to read, write and count, which corresponds to the basic attainment levels outlined in the New Integrated Primary Curriculum of 1983 (MMoE, 2000a). The illiteracy rate is perhaps a reflection of senior Malaysian citizens born in the years before Independence.

At the tertiary level, the availability of nearly 20 government-funded universities and more than 600 privately funded colleges and university colleges has enabled around 100,000 Malaysians to enter higher education annually (MMoE, 2000c). This number is still growing with the more recent move by established foreign universities like the University of Nottingham, Curtin University of Technology and others to set up campuses in Malaysia.

Young Malaysians from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds tend to be provided with the opportunity to realise their potentials through education. However, there is also evidence that the full potential for development has not been fully realised in the Malaysian education system. First, the focus at all levels seems to be on attainment in standardised tests, to such an extent that education becomes merely a process of inputting secondary knowledge in preparation for major examinations (Lowe, 1998). Most teachers would attest to this because the education system in Malaysia seems to advocate a style of learning closely related to rote-learning practices at primary, secondary and even tertiary level (Adnan, 1998a). Perhaps this is why on the one hand Malaysian students score comparatively well in standardised tests. When it comes to skills like synthesis and evaluation of knowledge, however, these students do not excel to the same extent as students from other developing countries sometimes do in similar circumstances. Wee Kiat (1998) argues that this is demonstrated by students' general performance in Malaysian higher learning institutions. He posits that, in the pursuit of academic excellence, tertiary students tend to be satisfied with paper qualifications, ignoring other facets of development, such as personal, social and emotional development. Higher education students also report that they find it difficult to adapt to university life, which to them "represents a major shift from the exam-oriented system" (Star Editorial, 1999, p. 7) that they are accustomed to.

Students with special educational needs might find it particularly difficult to reach their full potential. For these students developing their full might also not be their highest priority. Their first priority would be to find schools that would accept them in the first place because Malaysian special schools are highly over-subscribed (MMoE, 2000c). Furthermore, Adnan (1999a) believes that the developmental curriculum for special education in Malaysia seems to focus too much on rehabilitation and institutionalisation. This is reflected in teaching strategies that focus on training special students to adapt to the able-bodied world, rather than developing their potential through academic knowledge and general education. This might have led to a wider policy of segregating most of these students, rather than the more progressive approach of incorporating them into mainstream schools (though the latter approach has been recently implemented on a wider scale). In the past, the function of special schools in Malaysia was likely to create dependency, forcing the individual child to an adult life hidden in the shadows of caregivers and diminutive welfare provisions. It also portrays how to a certain extent the education system might have "systematically failed to help special learners to use the potential within them for educational attainment" (Adnan, 1999a, p. 7). Pheng (1999), who is a special needs teacher in Malaysia, argues that most know that certain approaches that they practise are old fashioned and outdated, based on what we might identify

as the dehumanising practices associated with Victorian Britain. Hopefully, with the assistance of the "inclusive" policy that is now being pushed by the Ministry of Education, these teachers will be able to change from a system that is predicated on antiquated practice and outdated pedagogy, to one that is more forward-looking and will uphold the rights of these special students to obtain an education that meets their real needs and wants.

### The Identity Function: national identity or inter/intra-racial divide?

Malaysia prides itself as being a nation where different ethnic communities live together in relative peace and harmony (Third World Institute, 1999). This achievement can be traced back to the identity function of education. One of the explicit aims of Malaysian education is nation-building, due to the fact that in a society as diverse as Malaysia's, intercultural solidarity is difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to achieve. Nevertheless, Malaysian schools have been quite successful in accomplishing the foregoing. First, through the introduction of national schools at the primary and secondary levels (MMoE, 2000c), students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds have been placed together and are taught together. National schools have also managed to partially tackle the problem of racist attitudes and anti-establishment beliefs (Adnan, 1999b). One of the possible reasons is that these schools have the explicit aim of creating and inculcating a Malaysian identity among students at all levels.

Second, the National Curriculum, introduced in the 1980s for both primary and secondary schools, has managed to reflect the nation's ethno-cultural diversity. Prescribed textbooks, for example, are required to represent in an equal way the voices of all major ethnic communities in Malaysia, and the writers and publishers of these books have constantly managed to achieve this. Supplemented with school-based routines such as raising the national flag (Jalur Gemilang), singing the National Anthem (Negaraku), reciting the National Oath (Rukunegara) and others, the identity function has been actualised through the schools.

Third, and perhaps the most important disseminator of a national identity, is the prominent status of the Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) in all aspects of life, particularly education (MMoE, 2000c). The use of Malay to teach all subjects, apart from foreign, indigenous and ethnic minority languages, has helped to foster a spirit of inter-relatedness among students from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. Thanks to the language planning policy of the government, it could be argued that the national language is the main contributor towards the creation of a Malaysian identity.

Malaysia also has so-called "National Type" schools, which are mono-ethnic in nature. These can be predominantly or wholly Malay, Chinese or Indian, and without supervision from the Ministry of Education these schools can realise a divisive agenda through their segregation-based approach. National Type schools might not contribute positively towards identity formation, especially if students from these schools can only identify with members of their own ethnic group outside of school. There is some evidence that National Type schools have contributed to

two negative effects on identity formation and nation-building. First, Santhiram (1995) found that students in National Type schools are known to develop friendship patterns almost exclusively within their own ethnic community outside of school. In truth, this trend is also evident in some national schools, where a student from a certain ethnic community will tend to identify only with students from her or his own community, even though this tendency is ameliorated by the fact that these students have to mix with people from other ethnicities on a daily basis.

Second, though National Type schools with a Malay majority receive the same level of funding as national schools from the government, the former are seen as providing a lower standard of education, especially if they are situated in rural areas. Expectations are lowered for students in such settings, and they are usually given the chance to enter government boarding schools. If these students have the academic ability, they are encouraged to seek academic success in these institutions. Although this approach can be fruitful, it is perhaps counterproductive if it leaves rural schools with those students who have weaker academic abilities, feeding the vicious cycle of underachievement in these schools. Since academically able students are moved from their immediate rural settings and resettle in elite boarding schools, the gap between rural and urban Malays widens, particularly in terms of social standing and economic affluence. Under these circumstances, some Malaysian schools might be promoting a divisive agenda. This divisiveness can threaten the formation of a national identity by undermining the objective of Malaysian Education to help "achieve national unity [and] to inculcate positives values" (MMoE, 2000b) in all students.

## The Economic Function: creating prosperity or social injustice?

No discussion about the social functions of education would be complete without examining the economic function, especially if we consider how rigorously Malaysia is preparing to achieve developed-nation status in the very near future. With reference to education in Malaysia, the economic function is framed mainly by the need "to produce quality manpower for national development" (MMoE, 2000b).

As we mentioned earlier, Malaysia aims to be a developed nation by the year 2020. The government hopes that this will be possible with the assistance of "Smart Schools". These schools are envisioned to meet the challenges of the Information Age, "especially the need for an IT literate population that [could work in] the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) which has started operations in 1999" (CDC, 1999). The MSC is meant to develop Malaysia into a regional and international technology and telecommunications hub by 2020. It is because of this need for knowledgeable workers within the MSC that the Smart School concept was conceived. As stated by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) of the Education Ministry (1999), it is hoped that Smart Schools will support the government's plans to obtain the status of a developed nation by creating a technologically oriented society and further to gain a competitive edge over other developed countries in the global economy.

Another initiative that has been taken to realise the economic function has been

the creation of more vocational–technical schools, as well as the introduction of new science–technology and economy–commerce-based subjects in mainstream schools (MMoE, 2000c). The government has also introduced a new measure whereby students who are in the science stream will only be able to study science-based subjects at the tertiary level. The aim is to accelerate the development of an "Information Technology Society" and to meet the needs of the MSC.

Nevertheless, without careful planning it is likely that the Smart School project will not be cost effective in the long run and will place a heavy burden not just on resources for education, but on parents and schools as well. According to Shelley *et al.* (1995), this is due to the fact that science and technology never stands still, even more so for information and computer technology (ICT) as we become more proficient in gathering and analysing data to make better decisions to enhance our living conditions and personal lifestyles. The concept of Smart Schools is based on the ideal that Malaysian schools would be able to procure cutting-edge computer hardware and software to enhance the teaching and learning dyad (CDC, 1999). This could greatly enhance the process of education in Malaysia, but requires enormous funding on behalf of the government. Thus, built into the ideal of Smart Schools is a requirement for parents and the community to contribute towards easing this financial burden. It follows that in most Smart Schools students will also be charged a "user fee" for the procurement of computer hardware and software. Less affluent students, it is argued, can be subsidised by "other means" (CDC, 1999). Unfortunately, the CDC does not outline what these "other means" might be. It should be clear from this that the cost of setting up and running Smart Schools can be a burden on school administrations and also on the parents of students who are the actual end-users of the computer hardware and software. Furthermore, it is planned that most Smart Schools will be set up in urban settings, where students are likely to be more affluent and technical support will be more readily available. Again, rural schools are likely to lose out, feeding into the vicious cycle of underachievement in these schools. Moreover, since ICT is developing at a tremendous rate, to keep up-to-date with current advances Smart Schools must develop/acquire new software and hardware, ideally every two years or less. This is based on Moore's Law, which has accurately predicted that relative computing power doubles every 18 to 24 months (Shelley *et al.*, 1995), creating new hardware and software applications in the process. If Smart Schools are unable to reflect this, then the technology that students use and acquire will always be outdated, creating a mismatch between training and employers' requirements in the highly competitive Malaysian labour market and also the MSC.

## Malaysian Teachers: the current situation

This final section will discuss how Malaysian teachers might be able to contribute to the social functions discussed earlier. However, as is evident from the previous sections, this contribution, as positive as it might be perceived, is also likely to have negative effects that we might only be able to study in hindsight.

First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that similar to the functions of

education, the role of a teacher is also one that is socially constructed. This can be demonstrated, according to Clarke and Cochrane (1998), by looking at how the label "teacher" relates to the social expectations associated with the term, and how these expectations translate into norms that pervade all dimensions of the teaching profession in a given context. In Malaysia (and other countries as well) teachers at all levels can only function in ways that are pre-defined for them as they are "placed under the scrutinising eyes of society" (Adnan, 2000a, p. 4).

Like most other countries, teachers in Malaysia have to be satisfied with a modest salary (relative to national norms for other professionals). They also have to juggle between fulfilling various managerial/clerical obligations whilst having to prepare for their actual classroom lessons (Adnan, 2000a). Hence, the Ministry of Education realises that one of its overarching duties is to help raise the standards of working and living for teachers. Also, the strenuous conditions that teachers have to work under tend to be de-motivating. The result is that some teachers, Sidhhu (2000) observes, "either do little of consequence or behave in a manner that brings disrepute to the profession" (p. 12). This is one of the weaknesses of the teaching profession in contemporary Malaysia. Adnan (2000b) argues that most teachers would be grateful if they could finish the syllabus, given the enormous burden and expectation placed on them to perform. This might be the cause of low teacher morale and the inability of some Malaysian teachers to realise a moral purpose. Teachers, Fullan (1999) posits, can only start becoming moral change agents in society if they feel pride in their work and are appropriately motivated. Even with the emphasis on educational attainment through standardised tests, this does not mean that teachers should ignore the humanistic role they must play. Malaysian teachers must realise that education should fulfil a bifurcated moral purpose, "[by] making a difference in the life chances of all students [and] contributing to societal development, harmony and democracy" (Fullan, 1999, p. 1).

## Malaysian Teachers as Agents of Change

With this and the three social functions discussed earlier in mind, we turn now to a consideration of how teachers might contribute towards Malaysia's development and the progress of its people, as well as the material effects that such a contribution could bring to Malaysian primary and secondary students.

First, we would argue that all Malaysian teachers should be able to contribute positively towards the developmental function, even if this seems unlikely. This is because all teachers have direct influence on the children and young people they teach. Aspects like personal, social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive development can be tackled by focusing on what Chapman (1986) has called a "progressive education agenda". This would entail knowing how teachers influence the learning of students, either in positive or negative ways. This agenda also means becoming aware of "the material effects of teacher expectations" on students' self-esteem and personality formation" (Chapman, 1986, p. 109). Malaysian teachers must become moral leaders in the classroom so that the younger generation can have suitable role models and the experience of contributing towards intercultural understanding and

national harmony, irrespective of any perceived dysfunctionality in familial units, immediate neighbourhood or wider community. What is even more crucial is to acknowledge the negative effects of issues like labelling and the hidden curriculum. Classroom learning should be scaffolded in such a way that students can strive to reach their potential, and to counteract the effects of labelling and the hidden curriculum. To what extent this is possible in the highly structuralised Malaysian setting remains to be seen.

The second social function under the direct influence of teachers is the identity function, which we would also place within the teachers' immediate locus of control. This is strengthened by the fact that the curriculum is already predisposed towards achieving national unity and to inculcate positives values (MMoE, 2000c). Teachers must incorporate these values in a critical and relevant manner within their lessons. Indeed, some teachers have already done this in their teaching practice, since it is one of the special target areas for humanities subjects, such as secondary level English. Values like respecting others, racial tolerance, and gender equality can be tackled quite effectively in the classroom. This is especially the case if we consider that resource materials and textbooks have long attempted to reflect the intercultural diversity and the real life experiences of Malaysians, and that the use of such materials is compulsory. However, there are two potential problem areas that we would like to identify.

First, some schools, as we have mentioned, are mono-ethnic and there is a possibility that the lessons may become didactic if students deem them to be irrelevant (or simply "boring"). A second and more complex problem is to present these issues that deal with nation-building and identity formation in ways that are appropriate, value-free and in line with government guidelines/policies that forbid discussions of issues "that could lead [students] to be destructive and negative" (Star Editorial, 1999, p. 6). For example, when highlighting interracial tolerance a lesson can only be presented cautiously because Malaysia is a country built upon the principles of affirmative action. Currently it favours the majority Malays, who are perceived as being socio-economically disadvantaged. As such, to an observer it might seem that the identity function in Malaysian education is realised through different pathways, some discriminatory, some unjust, but all legitimated according to particular constructions and interpretations of history and contemporary political discourse.

The third of the functions, the economic function, is the most difficult for teachers to contribute towards. This is because teachers are unlikely to be able to institute new policies or affect new directions in education. Nevertheless, one possible avenue is for the trade unions that represent teachers in the primary and secondary sectors to make public statements or discuss the economic function of education with the government. Consequently, some teachers merely legitimate the meritocracy of schools and tell students that the only way they can hope for "a better life" is by scoring high on standardised tests derived from "a standard diet of rote-learning and lecturing" (Brazier, 1999a, p. 24). Brazier's statement answers the question why some Malaysian teachers only focus on teaching the subject matter and finishing the prescribed syllabus. Perhaps the current situation necessitates this drift, given a

situation where "teaching should not and cannot be a process of trial and error" (Adnan, 1998b, p. 4), because failure in standardised national tests will close the doors that education once opened to students.

This is the reality of education in Malaysia if we look beyond the educational philosophy espoused by the Ministry of Education and the Smart School websites, and this reality pervades all dimensions of Malaysian life. To the distant observer it is easy to fall into the what we label the "Just Because Trap". This assumes that just because strong policies and positive ideals are present, they will have actual concrete effects on the ground. In reality a smooth and complete transfer from policy to practice is difficult because of the socio-political structure, exacerbated by the complexities of a multicultural society. It is possible that some facets of the Malaysian education system can make it difficult for teachers to make the full moral contribution that they are capable of. On the other hand, even with such difficulties, positive approaches need to be adopted so that, as Sidhhu (2000) argues, a teacher is not considered to have failed her or his professional duties or (more importantly) to have failed in making a positive contribution towards the development of her or his students. In a different light, even the most holy of intentions could be tainted if we never question and re-evaluate our actions. That is what good educators should do, not only in Malaysia but also in other countries, "to continually review and readjust their actions, so that education becomes a tool of personal, social, emotional and spiritual development and empowerment, not otherwise" (Adnan, 2000b, p. 4). To what extent teachers can succeed when faced with a system that might be structurally inadequate and less sensitive to the needs of minority groups, but is simultaneously overpowering in its implementation, is debatable. For Malaysian teachers at least, conditions are slowly improving, thanks to progressive new initiatives by the Malaysian government.

## Conclusion

Every education system has its share of imperfections, and for every set of choices that are made, we rule out certain benefits that would accrue from alternative choices. In fact, educational/policy decisions in developing countries are particularly difficult to make because "choices have to be made between alternatives which are equally unsatisfactory to people making the choice" (Simmons, 1980, p. 2). On the other hand, it is possible to hope for a benign spiral in which education permits a wider range of choices and provides the cognitive and moral wherewithal to make decisions which will bring maximum advantages and benefits to all Malaysian citizens, irrespective of race, religion and socio-economic background or even disability.

Schools and teachers can play a crucial role in contributing to that benign spiral, and this role is central to the teaching profession to the extent that it supersedes the socially constructed functions of education—if it means making a difference in the life chances of any and all students. This is paramount in a country like Malaysia with its diversity of people and cultures, where it will be increasingly difficult to meet the needs of every section of society. It is a challenge that Malaysia must take on to

maintain its peace, harmony and prosperity. For teachers, to be able to realise a moral purpose and to positively contribute towards the school environment necessitates (amongst others) being able to understand the nature of the social functions of education. Only by critically examining the kinds of positive and negative effects they can have on students, in light of the current ideologies dominating educational discourse (and with the benefit of professional reflection), will teachers be able to contribute towards intercultural understanding, nation-building, and the advancement of society.

*Address for correspondence: Airil Haimi Adnan, c/o 1882 Regat Rapat Jaya 4, 31350 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia; e-mail: airil@lineone.net*

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