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Moral values and good citizens in a multi-ethnic society: A content analysis of moral education textbooks in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important roles of schools is to enable students to become good citizens, capable of participating in the public affairs of society. However, the term 'good citizens' evokes different interpretations and definitions in different value systems. Using the methods of quantitative content analysis and narrative analysis, this paper aims to identify the dominant moral values of a good citizen that are conveyed by Malaysian moral education textbooks. The findings demonstrate that 'responsibility' is the dominant value for shaping a good citizen in Malaysia. The value of responsibility in the textbooks embraces not only the meanings of self-obligation and accountability, but responsibility is also defined as an individual's sense of self-discipline in their behaviour that enables them to avoid conflict and strive for harmonious social order. The other important values are "Respect", "Helpful", "Hard-working" and "Caring". This study provides an example of how a multi-ethnic nation state like Malaysia promotes these moral values through its educational curriculum, for political legitimacy and forging national unity.

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Introduction

The public school system has been used as a vehicle to enact social or political agendas, and one of the main goals of education in schools is to develop and encourage students to become good citizens, capable of both participating in and playing a proper social role in the country. However, the definition of a 'good citizen' varies from country to country, or even within a country (Halstead & Pike, 2006; Morris & Cogan, 2001; Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2001). The value of being a citizen is one of the key factors in understanding why the definition of a good citizen evokes different interpretations. *Values refer to the principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour, the standards by which particular actions are judged to be good or desirable. Examples of values are love, equality, freedom, justice, happiness, security, peace of mind and truth* (Halstead & Monica, 2000).

A student who believes in the value of responsibility may go on to become a citizen who obeys the law and conforms to policymakers' intentions, while another who is concerned with the value of justice may challenge the status quo. Both may be considered good citizens, yet both may also display very different characteristics. All countries, regardless of political ideologies, either explicitly or implicitly want to educate their people to be good citizens, who are well aligned with the country's values. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Malaysia has continued to struggle with the challenges of nation-building since its establishment as a nation state in 1957, and following its emergence as Malaysia (comprising

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Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak) in 1963 (Brown, 2007; Ishak, 2002; Ting, 2014). Education is used as a means for promoting national identity and social cohesion in Malaysia. Following the ethnic riots of 1969,¹ national unity became, in the government's own words, 'the over-riding objective' of the education system (Brown, 2007; Cheah, 2003). In light of these social and political goals, a variety of school curricula have been developed to prepare students to play their correct role in nation-building, one of which is the moral education curriculum. This paper aims to analyse the moral values conveyed by Malaysian moral education textbooks and the characteristics of a good citizen in a culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse society such as Malaysia.

The multi-ethnic society in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, home to a number of different ethnic groups. The statistics reveal the following breakdown: Malays, 50.1%; Chinese, 22.6%; indigenous, 11.8%; Indian, 6.7%; other, 0.7%; and non-citizens, 8.2% (2010 est.). In terms of religion, the country has the following make-up: Muslim 61.3%; Buddhist, 19.8%; Christian, 9.2%; Hindu, 6.3%; Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions, 1.3%; other, 0.4%; none, 0.8%; and unspecified, 1% (2010 est.) (The Worldfact Book, 2016). The majority of the Muslims in Malaysia are ethnic Malay; being a Muslim is one of the components of the definition of the Malay in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. However, religious freedom is guaranteed to other ethnic. The Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) is the official national language, but the mother tongues of non-Malays are in widespread use through newspapers, books, and separate radio and television channels (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012). There are three categories of primary schools under the national education system: the national primary school, which uses Malay as the teaching medium; Chinese primary schools, whose teaching medium is the Chinese mother tongue; and Tamil primary schools whose teaching medium is the Indian mother tongue. The majority of parents send their children to their mother tongue school (Raman & Tan, 2010). Malaysia is one of the countries that is proud of its various cultures and traditions, and makes diversity itself a matter of national pride and identity (Blum, 2014; Ting, 2014). But ethnic tensions have always been present.

The multi-ethnic composition of the population in Malaysia is a legacy of British rule over Malaya.² The Malays were the indigenous people but the British colonial government recruited a large workforce from India and China, which transformed the character of the Malay states to a plural society (Tan, 2000). The Indians and Chinese later became the Malaysian citizen. Based on a *social contract* discourse, the granting of citizenship to the non-Malays during the independence period was based on a *quid pro quo* condition for the special position of the Malays. Over time, the special position has become a symbol of Malay supremacy (Cheah, 2003; Ting, 2014), by which the Malays receive privileges in economic, cultural and language aspects. The Malaysian Federal Constitution singles out *bumiputera* 'sons of the soil' (comprising Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak) in contrast to *non-bumiputera* (ethnic Chinese, Indians and other nonindigenous peoples) for privileged access to economic and educational resources through an ethnic-based quota system. (Balasubramaniam, 2007:35). The rationality of this special right is not only based on the status of the 'sons of the soil' (indigenous) but also the discourse that the economic backwardness of the Malay (indigenous) population is a legacy of British neglect during the colonial period. The government argued that this is one of the reasons for the ethnic riots of 1969 (Brown, 2007; Ishak, 2002).

The different status of citizens has caused controversies; while the Malays continue to fight to hold on to their position as the 'sons of the soil' (indigenous), and believe that their language and culture, and Islam, should be at the core of national identity, the Chinese and Indians struggle for their rights, and for equality and justice with regard to their culture and identity (Noor, 2017). Because of the high degree of diversity among its population and the existence of ethnicity sentiments, overcoming the issue of ethnic division is a major objective of education in Malaysia (Cheah, 2003; Noor, 2017; Selvadurai et al., 2015).

Moral education in Malaysia

In Malaysia, moral education is a compulsory subject for non-Muslim students,³ from primary to secondary school. It is also a compulsory examination subject in the Malaysian Certificate of Education, which is a national examination. In 1979, a report issued by the Malaysian Cabinet Committee commented that:

¹ On May 10th, 1969, Malaysia held a National election. The result showed that the Malay-dominated ruling coalition performed poorly, and the mainly Chinese opposition scored major victories in urban constituencies. This was viewed with alarm by many Malays. Tensions between ethnic groups provoked rioting between Malays and Chinese on May 13th, which lasted for a few weeks. According to official sources, 196 people died, 493 were injured, and 45 were held for trial for murder or arson. Hundreds of buildings were razed. Tensions persisted for months. The government declared the country was in a state of emergency and suspended the Parliament until February, 1971 when parliamentary rule was restored (Wicks, 1971)

² Malaya was under British colonial rule from the late 18th century until it gained independence in 1957.

³ While non-Muslim students are learning Moral Education, Muslim children are studying Islamic ethics. Moral education and Islamic education are conducted at the same time, but separately, in school. Islamic education provides the basic knowledge of theology (Al-Quran, Hadis, aqidah), Islamic laws (feqah), history of the prophet (sirah), Islamic civilization, and Islamic Manners and Morals (akhlak Islamiyyah). The aim of this curriculum is to educate Muslim students become good children and good citizens based on the Muslim way of life in relationship to God, self, family, the environment, society and the nation. (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2017a; Hashim & Langgulong, 2008).

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