Language policy and mother tongue education in Malaysia: the challenge of multiculturalism

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Malaysia is a multi-ethnic post-colonial country. Until now, language and education have represented two significant tools in the nation-building process. In its language and education policies the Malaysian government is applying the principle of “One nation, one language, one country”, an ethno-nationalistic ideology that inclines to shape other ethnic group identities with a single language and culture. For example, the National Language Act 1967 and National Cultural Policy 1971 are two key governmental documents that have inherited this ideology in their wording. As a result, this social engineering inevitably spurs disagreement and dissent all through Malaysian society.

In addition, Malaysia has been implementing a multistream education system: Malay, Chinese, and Tamil as the language of instruction in different schools, allowing ethnic groups access to mother tongue-based education. Nonetheless, opponents still see this approach as an obstacle to nation building, a stumbling stone for national unity, rather than seeing the effectiveness of using the mother tongue in knowledge learning.

Does a multistream or mother tongue-based education system promote social cohesion? Is multiculturalism suitable in nation-building? Besides examining and analyzing the current language policy and the status of mother tongue-based education in Malaysia, this paper will try to seek answers to all the abovementioned questions.