

A case on Tamil education in Malaysia: Is Tamil education being sidelined?

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Abstract. This paper is a part of an empirical research that investigates the status of Mandarin and Tamil language in Malaysia. The empirical research is cleaved into three research questions and hence, three fieldworks. This paper singles out the findings from one of the fieldworks of this study and seeks to lay out and discuss the specific findings with the aim to unveil issues that surround Tamil education in Malaysia. The findings highlighted in this paper involve an interview with a principal of a Tamil vernacular primary school in northern Malaysian state. With the centre of the topic polarized around the notion of Tamil education in Malaysia, the findings obtained from the interview will be presented and discussed as to attain some ideas not only regarding the status of Tamil education in Malaysia, but also the underlying factors that instigate the issues surrounding it.

1 Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore the issues that revolve around the notion of Tamil education in Malaysia. The issues mentioned will be evidenced by findings obtained from one part of the fieldwork carried out for this study. This paper will touch on issues related to certain aspects such as monetary flow, students' enrolment, shortage of trained and graduate teachers and the development of the so-called minority language, as they revolved around the Tamil education in Malaysia. The analysis and the discussion of this findings are presumed to be able to illuminate on the problem statement of this study, which is to find out the status of Tamil education in Malaysia.

Holding the identity as a heterogeneous country with more than half of its people capable of speaking more than one language, it is safe to assume that the concern related to minority languages and vernacular education in Malaysia would not simply be overlooked. However, issues concerning Tamil language and Tamil vernacular school continue to be a gray area for researchers and scholars who seek to investigate the status of Tamil language and the development of Tamil education in Malaysia. Issues such as the constant low rate of enrolment of both Indian and non-Indian students to Tamil vernacular schools, the drastic reduction of the number of Tamil vernacular schools (<http://www.malaysia-today.net/2011/11/05/tamil-schools-in-malaysia-denied-fully-financial-aided-status-is-unconstitutional-a-illegal/>) and problems in obtaining fully-aided status are examples of persisting concerns. Findings obtained from an interview with the principal of a Tamil vernacular primary school in northern Malaysian state seem to prove that perhaps, Tamil education in Malaysia is in fact running on a satisfying pace.

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In the next section of literature review, issues surrounding Tamil education in Malaysia are briefly laid out and discussed.

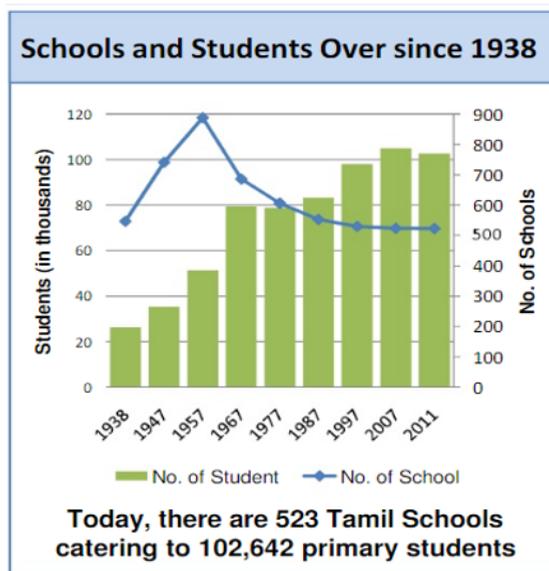
2 Literature review

2.1 Issues surrounding Tamil education in Malaysia

The growing number of issues that revolve around Tamil education in Malaysia is the testimony to the criticality of the development and future of Tamil language. A surfeit of issues pertaining to Tamil education in Malaysia was listed by Paraman in Malaysia Today, where he emphasized how Tamil education in Malaysia continue to face dire issues amid rapid development in the Malaysian education system (Paraman, 2011).

2.1.1 Issue 1: Low student enrolment

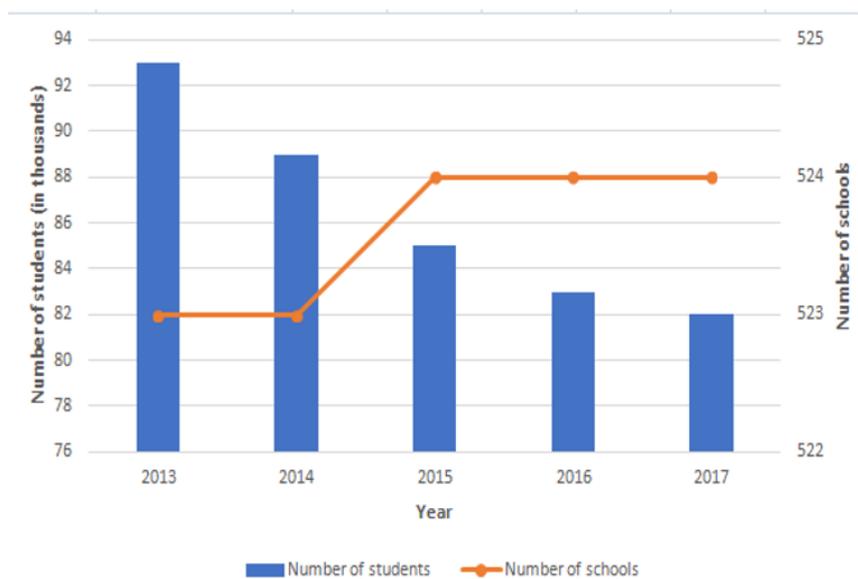
One of the biggest issues that continues to haunt Tamil education is the issue of low enrolment of students into Tamil vernacular primary school (SJKT).



Source: EMiS, MOE; Tamil Foundation Research Unit

Fig. 1 Number of Schools and Students 1938-2011

Figure 1 depicts a continuous improvement in terms of the number of student enrolling into Tamil vernacular primary school from year 1938 until 2007, with slight decline in year 1977 and year 2011. Judging from the trends shown in Figure 1, the future of Tamil education seems to be promising in terms of the students' enrolment into the Tamil vernacular primary schools. However, year 2013 saw the consistent decrease of the number of students enrolling into Tamil vernacular primary schools. Figure 2 below shows the number of schools and students of SJKT from year 2013 until 2017.



Source: Malaysia Educational Statistics 2013-2017

Fig. 2 Number of Schools and Students 2013-2017

In Figure 2, it can be clearly seen that the number of students enrolling into Tamil vernacular primary schools has been continuously decreasing from year 2013 until 2017 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). This, however, is not the only issue. For instance, it has been reported by the Tamil Foundation Research Unit that 63% of Tamil schools are under-enrolled (<150 students). In fact, there is a total of 68 schools (13%) claimed to have fewer than 25 students, and on the verge of closure (Elanjelian, 2011). In 2016, there was only one Malay student enrolled in Tamil school out of the 2,000-odd students entering Year One in 70 Tamil schools state-wide (“Malay kid enters Tamil school,” 2016). Similarly, in year 2017, only one Malay student enrolled in Tamil school (“Malay boy only Year One pupil in Tamil school,” 2017). Recent news reported that in year 2018, more than 20 Tamil vernacular primary schools in Kedah are in the midst of dire straits owing to the declining number of students' enrolment. In fact, it has also been reported that one of the oldest schools in the state, SJK (T) Ladang Dublin Bahagian 7, does not have any Year One pupil this year. The school also has no student in Years Two to Four. There are only five students in Years Five and Six.’ (“20 Tamil schools in Kedah hit by low enrolment,” 2018)

2.1.2 Issue 2: Number of schools

Looking from the angle of the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools in Malaysia, the situation is almost as ram shackled as the issue of low enrolment previously discussed. This phenomenon is starkly juxtaposed with that of the phenomenon of the number of schools shown within the same figure (Figure 1). The blue graph representing the number of schools from the year 1938 until 2011.

In 2015, there were only 523 SJK (T), which makes it the lowest amongst vernacular schools whereas, SJK (C) with 1296 schools and national (SK) with 5943 schools. This shows that Tamil schools, when compared to other vernacular schools, is the smallest and perhaps, least prioritized group. It is not surprising that in fact, Tamil education system is seen as a sham and a mockery by some, even suggesting Tamil education system the Cinderella of the

whole Malaysian education system (Arasaratnam, 1970). While the number of SJK (C) schools and national schools has increased throughout the years, with SJK (T) it does not seem to be the case. The number of SJK (T) schools, unlike SJK (C) and national schools, remains unchanged since the last nine years (refer Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison between the three types of National-based primary schools in Malaysia, 2006 and 2015 (*number of schools*)

Type of Schools	2006	2015	-/+
National	5774	5943	169
National-type (C)	1288	1296	8
National-type (T)	523	523	0
Total	7585	7762	177

Table 1 shows the comparison between the three types of National-based primary schools in Malaysia (in terms of the number of schools), with the year of focus being the year of 2006 and 2015. The main purpose of presenting Table 1 is to highlight how there has been no changes in the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools from the year 2006 and 2015 (highlighted in red). Looking at this situation, it can be presumed that one of the factors might be lack of funding. This is because, if we go through the history of Tamil schools in Malaysia, we can see that most are run and funded by the community itself or by Christian missionary bodies such as the Ladies' Bible and Tracts Society, the Society for the propagation of Christianity, and the Big Church Missions. Figure 3 below illustrates the growth of National type schools with National Type-T way behind National and National Type-C:

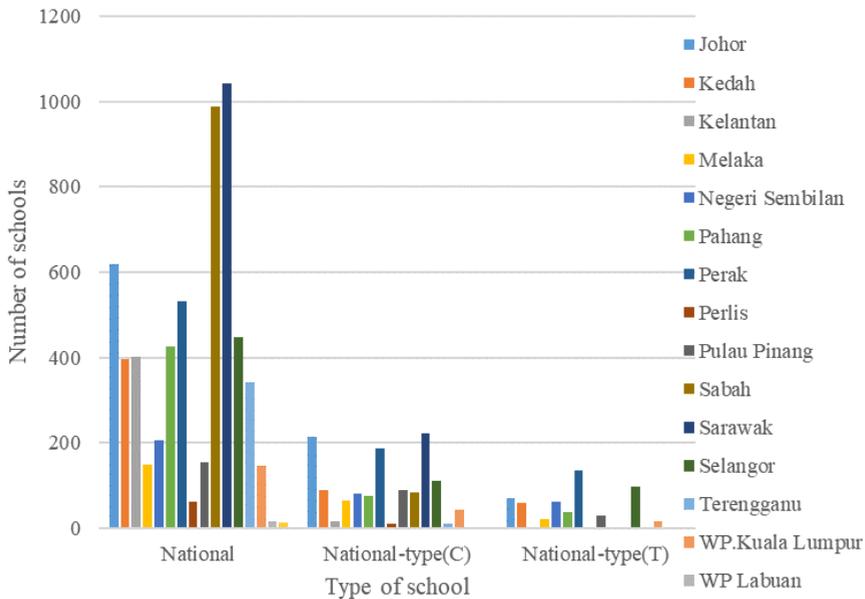


Fig. 3. Number of Schools According to States and Types of Schools

Figure 3 shows the trend of the number of schools (three types of National-based schools) according to the states in Malaysia. In Figure 3 above, the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools in Malaysia is dangerously small as compared to the National schools and Chinese vernacular primary schools. However, this is not the main emphasis in Figure 3 above. The main emphasis is to highlight the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools which dismally, out of the 14 Malaysian states, five states has zero number of Tamil vernacular primary schools. These states are Sabah, Sarawak, Terengganu, Wilayah Persekutuan (WP) Labuan and WP Putrajaya.

3 Methodology and method

3.1 Methodology

The methodology for this study is phenomenology. However, this study does not utilize the whole concept of phenomenology but only apply the perspective of phenomenology. In other words, this study is phenomenologically-informed. Phenomenology, according to (van Manen, 2007) can be defined as “a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (pg. 12). This means to say, phenomenology is a methodology that utilizes human-lived experience as flexible foundation and source to investigate issues. Ultimately, the selection of the phenomenological perspective as the methodology for this study is rooted in the realization that this study revolves largely around the notion of ‘human lived experience’. This core perspective of phenomenology is seen as a crucial perspective for this study. Through the process of analyzing the experience of the research participant, this study aims to obtain an understanding and answers for the presumption constructed on the research objectives and

research problems. Another way of saying this is that, as regard to the objective of this study, human lived experience is a suitable way in making our steps towards seeking out the answers for the research questions of the study.

3.2 Method

Selection of methods is another step of carrying a study. Methods are one of the components in a paradigm (Scotland, 2012) and are described by Crotty (1998) as specific techniques and procedures used to collect and analyze data. As mentioned in the previous section, the selection of methods is established from the thread of the methodology selected. Since the method of semi-structured interview allows a researcher to listen to the voices of the people who has lived in the experience, this method is seen as a suitable method to investigate a complex notion such as language, status of language, minority language and language education.

The selection of a teacher as a participant for the fieldwork is grounded by the researcher's *a priori* idea of teachers being at the forefront of the act of implementing the language policies in schools. There are three primary schools involved in the semi-structured interview conducted for policy implementers, which in this study, is the specific label tagged on the teachers. The primary outline of the fieldwork is to conduct semi-structured interview with teachers from the selected vernacular schools. The schools involved are national primary school (SK), Chinese vernacular primary school (SJKC), and Tamil vernacular primary school. In this paper, however, the findings that will later be discussed is extracted from an interview with a principal of a Tamil vernacular primary school in northern Malaysian state. In other words, the findings from the remaining two fieldwork places; national primary school and Chinese vernacular primary school are not discussed in this paper.

During the initial attempt of entering a Tamil vernacular school, one Tamil school in a rural area was selected and the procedure was piloted. Nevertheless, upon meeting the principal of the school to arrange a scheduled interview with one of the teachers, the principal clarified that the school did not have any Malay or Chinese students studying in the school. This unexpected turnabout has resulted in an unplanned interview with the principal herself as the researcher believes there must be some underlying reasons as to why there has been no Malay or Chinese students enrolling in the school. This is important because this specific inquiry may offer answers to one of the fundamental questions behind this study; is Tamil language being side-lined?

Considering that a principal still falls under the same roof as a teacher since a principal is also an educator and in the context of this study, a policy implementer, data from this unplanned interview with the principal was analysed to provide answers that can illuminate some fundamental questions of this study.

4 Findings

In this section, the findings from one of the fieldworks in this study is laid out and discussed. These findings are revolved around the data obtained from an interview with the principal of a Tamil vernacular school as mentioned earlier.

During the interview with the principal, she assents there is indeed a decrease in the number of Chinese and Malay students enrolling in Tamil schools. When asked to provide a

reason for the persistent decrease, the principal stated that it was majorly because parents refused to send their children to Tamil schools. She, however, declined to explain further. Following this, the researcher asked her opinion on the development of Tamil education in Malaysia. She confidently stated there have indeed been many improvements on Tamil education. She accentuated her answer by explaining these improvements include the syllabus for Tamil education and specifically, the appearance of Tamil schools. To prove her point, the principal referred to a book published by the Ministry of Education titled '200 Tahun Kegemilangan Pendidikan Tamil di Malaysia' (200 Years of the Glory of Tamil Education in Malaysia) and pointed to the improved physical appearance of Tamil schools. With the book playing the role of a proof, she continued showing pictures of the improvements, that is, differences in the old appearance of Tamil school in the 90's and compared them with pictures of obviously much improved appearance of the Tamil schools today.

For the next question in which the principal was asked why there are very small number of Malay and Chinese (non-Indians) enrolling in the school, she shrugged her shoulders and said it was probably because they did not want to attend the school. On her opinion regarding students in her school, she gave a simple answer saying that everything was okay. Again, she declined any further explanation. For the last question of the interview, the researcher decided to ask about the reported decreasing number of students enrolling into Tamil schools. There was a sense of unwillingness to agree in the answer given by the principal as she stated that, "yes, there is a decrease". She explained further by saying that the approximate decreasing rate of Tamil schools are from 1000 plus to 542 schools.

5 Discussion

This section presents the discussion on the paradox between the findings obtained from the interview with the principal of a Tamil vernacular primary school in northern Malaysian state and the issues surrounding Tamil education in Malaysia. The crux of the discussion will be regarding the issue of low rate of enrolment of the students to Tamil vernacular primary schools, the issue of monetary flow and the issue of physical appearance and infrastructures of Tamil vernacular primary schools in Malaysia.

5.1 The paradox: Is Tamil education being sidelined in Malaysia?

From the initial analysis of the data concerning the interview with the principal, it is pertinent to presume that the principal of the Tamil vernacular school is playing the role of an advocate of Tamil education. The findings obtained from the interview suggest that a lot has to do with the earlier mentioned issues that surround Tamil education. The principal indeed concurs some improvements in Tamil education in Malaysia are needed. This implies there is in fact more to the matter, essentially when we compare the nature of the issues with the role of the principal in Tamil education. While we continue to be very much concerned, it is also important to listen to the voices of the people who are the insiders of the vernacular schools themselves. In other words, the voice of the principal interviewed for this study can unearth some real condition and phenomenon of Tamil education in Malaysia.

Coming back to the statement given by the principal, her statement interestingly contradicts prevalent issues surrounding Tamil education system. This is because she feels that notion of improvements should equally take consideration the syllabus of Tamil education books and the appearance of Tamil vernacular primary schools. She was clearly

determined to prove her point by showing me pictures in the book '200 Tahun Kegemilangan Pendidikan Tamil di Malaysia' (200 Years of the Glory of Tamil Education in Malaysia) how Tamil schools have better their syllabus and appearance. This assertion by the Principal that Tamil schools have improved over the years has inevitably stirred up lingering question as to whether Tamils vernacular primary schools are truly being sidelined. However, it can be argued, in the sense that perhaps the principal, being an Indian by ethnicity, culture, religion and language, subconsciously *chose* to believe that Tamil vernacular primary schools are indeed undergoing improvements. This argument is grounded on the fact that in the interview itself, she had admitted there was indeed a decrease in the number of students enrolling in Tamil schools. Juxtaposed against her statement that Tamil schools have undergone improvements and that everything was okay in her school, in any case, raises the question as why there continue to be a decline in enrolment of students in Tamil schools.

First, in relation to the point made by the principal regarding the physical appearance of the school, there is a point that stepped into the light. In this study, the context of the students mentioned is focused on Chinese and Malay students attending Tamil schools. Although there is a chance that an improved appearance of a school may indicate that the school is stable, there is slight possibility that enrolment of Chinese and Malay students into the school is not as 'improved' as the appearance. This is considered based on data gathered from interview sources and fieldwork conducted during the study that provided clear evidences of incremental decline in the number of Chinese and Malay students enrolling into Tamil schools. A statement by the State Tamil schools' coordinator, in which he hopes the school's new building will attract more parents to send their children to the school (Lian, Aravinthan, & Chiam, 2016) may be a cause for optimism. But his statement, when laid side by side with the statement by the principal regarding the appearance of the school seems to elicit distinctively different meaning concerning improved appearance of Tamil schools and improved enrolment. The principal and the State Tamil schools' coordinator appear to have different perception as to whether an improved appearance of the schools can have an impact on students enrolling into Tamil schools.

Second, still concerning physical appearance and the number of students' enrolment in Tamil schools, in 2016, there was also a similar disparity with a statement given by the Deputy Education Minister, Datuk P. Kamalanathan in which he mentioned the number of students in Tamil schools in Malaysia have undergone numerous improvements in terms of facilities and infrastructure. He claimed that over the years, Tamil education has grown in leaps and bounds and that apart from the physical changes to the schools, there were also many students, both Indians and non-Indians, enrolling into Tamil schools ("Tamil education goes online," 2016). Yet, his statement contradicted in the number of students enrolled in Tamil schools which showed a decline from about 97,000 in 2013 to 92,000 in 2014 ("Only 13600 Students Enrolled in Tamil School," 2015). This contradiction between the data and the statement by the Deputy Education Minister creates several presumptions. One of them being the possibility that language in Malaysia, although arguably treated solely as a language, is also essentially intertwined with other aspects such as religion, culture, political assertion and ethnicity.

Third, in term of monetary flow, undoubtedly there has been a reliable flow of monetary assistance for Tamil schools. Information obtained during fieldwork for example, indicates a sufficient flow of donations to develop Tamil schools in this northern Malaysian state. This includes the school of the Principal I interviewed earlier which is one of the recipients of the financial assistance. This information triggered a few thoughts on whether this specific school is facing financial instability; which if it is true, it would be a contradiction to the

discussion about the appearance of the school. Although, the fact that the appearance of the school has improved purports that other important aspects of the schools such as education materials and utilities are also in good condition for them to spend the money on improving the physical appearance of the school. In other words, it can be concluded at this stage of the study that Tamil schools, at least the Tamil school that I investigated so far, does not suffer from financial instability. Donations to the school are possibly a gesture of gratitude from parties who are concerned with Tamil education in Malaysia.

Fourthly, in terms of the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools in Malaysia, there seems to be a new illumination from Asmah Haji Omar in her book in 2016, in which she mentioned that there was an increase in the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools in Malaysia in 2015. According to Omar, one Tamil vernacular primary school was opened on 1 March 2015 as a new initiative of the Prime Minister which added to the number of SJK (T) in Malaysia, with a total number of 524 schools in 2015. In addition, Omar also mentioned that there would be six more new schools on the way (Omar, 2016). This statement by Omar, when placed in parallel with that of the discussion for Table 1 in Section 2, creates another confusion. The confusion arises from the fundamental question of this study itself; is Tamil language and Tamil education in Malaysia being sidelined? While the statistical evidences shown in Table 1 and 2 imply that the development of Tamil education seems to be in the backwater of school education in Malaysia, the statement from Omar seems to prove otherwise. Omar highlighted that the addition in the number of Tamil vernacular primary schools is done in the interest of providing the Indian community in this country basic education through their mother tongue (Omar, 2016).

From the discussion, there is a possibility that perhaps, Tamil language is not being sidelined or marginalized in Malaysia, but rather the language is being deprioritized by the responsible parties. Also, it may perhaps be best to hold on to a statement given some time ago by the MIC president Datuk Seri G. Palanivel. He stresses that the government has promised the Indian community that not a single Tamil school will be closed. He emphasized that Tamil schools, where necessary, would instead be relocated to areas with higher Indian population densities (“Only 13600 Students Enrolled in Tamil School,” 2015). Although there may be some amongst the Indian community who are pessimistic, it is a fact that so far, no Tamil school has been closed and that the future of Tamil language and Tamil education in Malaysia to date, is guaranteed.

6 Conclusion

The issues surrounding Tamil education are not a bullet-proof indication that Tamil education in Malaysia is at the brink of deterioration and disappearance. The findings extracted from the interview with the principal of a Tamil vernacular school revealed that there is more to the issues that surround Tamil language and Tamil education in Malaysia. The intricacies of the problem are presumed to be rooted in the fact that we are dealing with the notion of minority language in a heterogeneous country. Regardless, solving the issues that surround Tamil education in Malaysia can be attained. It is crucial that Malaysians from all walks of life adopt the issue of Tamil language and Tamil education as a collective concern that should continue be investigated and solved.

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