The Schools of Malaya

Frederic Mason, M. A.
Professor of Education,
University of Malaya

A Background to Malaya Book

Published by DONALD MOORE for

EASTERN UNIVERSITIES PRESS LTD.
SINGAPORE
1959
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>(v)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to third Edition</td>
<td>(vi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School Systems</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress in the Provision of Education</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Policy in Malaya</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In the three chapters which follow an account has been given of the schools of Malaya, which should help a person overseas or a layman in Malaya to understand the complex educational system. Inevitably details have had to be omitted and only brief references have been made to the history of education in Malaya, which can throw light on to the present complexities. Readers should not expect to find an account of the flesh and blood of education, illustrations and stories about Malayan pupils and teachers — for that they will have to wait for the emergence of schoolmaster novelists. What follows is a skeleton or framework into which other accounts about education in the newspapers and elsewhere can be fitted. The story covers the post-war years and needs to be constantly supplemented by reports of the latest developments.

To avoid misunderstanding reference is made in the book to both forms and standards in the schools, and readers may use the terminology with which they are familiar i.e. the old or the new.

I am indebted to the Education Departments of the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore for giving me up-to-date figures of pupils in schools.

PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA
INTRODUCTION TO THIRD EDITION

Since the last edition was published, enrolments in the schools have steadily increased and in both territories the struggle to provide education for every child continues. But there is no indication that either territory will solve its population problems which make the provision of satisfactory social services so difficult. However, so far there has been no crisis in which educational development has been drastically restricted by lack of money and the two Governments have now adopted salary scales for teachers which attempt to maintain the cost of education per head at a feasible level.

There have been no significant changes in the educational policy in Singapore described in Chapter Three p. 25. As a consequence of that policy increasing attention has been given to the Chinese-medium schools and Singapore is moving rapidly to a dual system in which the Chinese-medium and English-medium schools are given equal emphasis. In the Federation of Malaya, the recommendations in the Razak Report described in Chapter Three were embodied in legislation and a review of achievements under this policy is likely to take place after the elections in 1959. The need for educational advisory bodies referred to in the postscript on p. 39 still remains to be satisfied. The Educational Ordinance in the Federation provides for a new Advisory Council on Education but the Council has not yet had its first meeting and teachers' organisations in Malaya and Singapore are not yet sufficiently strong and united to provide advice to which the Governments must pay heed.

Reference is made in Chapter Three, p. 24, to four periods in the development of education in Malaya. The pattern of education in Singapore and Malaya is still that of the third stage, but with the achievement of independence in Malaya in 1957 and self-government in Singapore in 1959, it is possible that in the next two years there will be a rapid transition from the third to the fourth stage.

February, 1959.

F. M.
CHAPTER ONE

THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

The wide range of schools which children in Malaya may attend is bewildering to the stranger and often forgotten by the resident. A list would include schools which were labelled English, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Religious and Arabic, and to this should be added special schools such as the Gimson Approved School in Singapore, the Gurney Advanced Approved School in Malacca, schools for the blind such as St. Nicholas, Penang, and social welfare centres where children, who do not go to school, may be given a rudimentary education. The schools may be private, in which case they are run for profit or maintained by a committee from fees and subscriptions, mission or "aided schools", supported to a greater or lesser degree by the Government, and schools which are completely controlled and maintained by Government. This complex school system may be understood if certain points are kept in mind. Schools are grouped according to the language which is used as the medium of instruction and not by nationality or race: thus English Schools use the English language, Malay schools the Malay language, Indian schools Tamil, a principal dialect of Southern India and Ceylon, and the Chinese schools Mandarin or Kuo-Yu. Sometimes a distinction is made between the English and the vernacular schools but it is apt to be confusing; strictly speaking only the Malay and Indian schools are vernacular schools, i.e. schools in which the medium of instruction is the language of the home. In the Chinese schools the majority of the children are from families which originally came from Southern China, where the Cantonese and Hokkien dialects differ considerably from Kuo-Yu (i.e. Kuo-Yu is a new language to the Chinese children) and on the other hand the English schools contain a small but steadily increasing percentage of children for whom English is the native language.

Confusion is caused frequently by the different uses of the term "Education Department". Each state and settlement in
the Federation of Malaya, the Colony of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya as a whole have Education Departments. In that all schools have to be registered, whether they are aided by Government funds or not, they come within the orbit of the Education Departments and can be said to be part of them. A second use of the term is that limiting it to the educational administration, in the same way that one refers to local education authorities or education committees in England. But the most common and confusing use of the term, that which appears in the newspapers and is used by Government, includes the administration and all the schools fully maintained and controlled by Government, e.g. a statement by the Education Department about the shortage of teachers for English schools is likely to refer only to the Government English schools and to exclude all the aided English schools, which are as much part of the system as the Government schools. It would be much better if the term “Education Department” were confined like the corresponding term “Ministry of Education” in England to the body which makes and administers the Education Policy.

English Schools

The minimum age of entry is six years and until recently the normal pattern has been to provide seven years in the primary or junior school in two primary Standards and Standards I to V, and for some children four years in the secondary school, standards VI to IX (now Forms II to V), the pupils taking in Standard IX (Form V) the School Certificate Examination organised by the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate. Recently the average age of a child entering a school has increased because there have been far more children applying than there have been places available, and the other children have been given preference: many children are now seven years of age when they begin school. The seven years of primary schooling are being reduced to six, and the children, although older when they begin school, should reach Standard V (now Primary VI in Singapore and Form I in Malaya) at the same age as the younger children in the earlier scheme. In some secondary schools post-school certificate classes have been established, where pupils can study for examinations which will secure them entry into the University of Malaya and other Universities and places of higher education.

The majority of schools have their sessions in the morning from (about) 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. but some primary school buildings are used by two schools and there are morning and afternoon
sessions. The afternoon session is from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. and it is dark and time for bed when the children get home. Any outdoor play and homework has to take place in the morning for the pupils, who may be any age from six to thirteen years. The two schools in the one building are organised as separate units, and in order to share the burden of an afternoon session, an afternoon school one year becomes a morning school the next and vice versa. The schools are open to children of all races and classes; there are no reliable figures available about the social and income status of the parents, but one can see the children of the rich arriving at the schools each morning in expensive cars, and one knows also of servants’ children and squatters’ children (at least in Singapore) who attend the schools. It is probable that there is a much greater percentage of children from the higher income group in the schools at present, but the number of children from the lower groups will increase steadily as the number of schools increases. Table I shows the percentage distribution of the races in English schools in 1956.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Malays</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indians</th>
<th>Europeans, Eurasians, &amp; others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation of Malaya</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A comparison with the table published in the first edition of this book shows that the proportion of Malays in the English schools has increased.)

Thus if one were to go into an English school in Singapore, four out of every five pupils would be Chinese, the fifth being Indian or Malay or Eurasian. The racial composition varies from state to state in the Federation: thus in Kelantan, a former un-federated state on the East coast, in a class of forty pupils one would expect to find thirty-one Malays, six Chinese and three
Indians, whereas in Selangor, where the composition is not very different from the average for the Federation, the composition would be twenty Chinese, twelve Indians, seven Malays and one Eurasian. Similarly all races are to be found in the teaching profession. There are Eurasians, Malays, Chinese, Indians and "Europeans", who include not only people from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, but also people from France, Germany, Italy and the United States of America: the teaching service in the Malay Peninsula is truly cosmopolitan. The Chinese and Indian races provide seven or eight out of every ten teachers, and the Malays, who form about 40% of the population, provide less than one teacher out of every ten. The great majority of teachers are "normal-trained" or students in normal training. Part-time training of a few hours per week takes place over a period of three years for student teachers who have obtained a School Certificate with a credit in English Language. Because of the rapid expansion of English education many of the students have had to teach almost full-time during their period of training and it has been difficult to give them adequate supervision.

The English schools can be divided into two groups, schools which are either maintained or aided by Government, and private schools which although registered do not receive a grant. Almost all the aided schools are provided by the Churches (mission schools); the greater part of these being under the control of the Methodist Church, a branch of the American Methodist Episcopal Church, or of the Roman Catholic Church, chiefly through two French teaching orders, the Dames de la St. Maur for the girls and the Christian Brothers (founder de la Salle) for the boys. The Church of England, whose Colonial chaplains were pioneers in the development of education in Malaya, provides only a few schools mainly in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore but some Government schools owe their origin to it. The Plymouth Brethren provides a girls' school in Kuala Lumpur. Before the Japanese occupation a very great part of the education, particularly for girls, was provided by the Churches; as the enrolment has increased the percentage attending Government schools has increased, especially in Singapore, but even today the greater part of girls’ education is provided by the Churches.

The curriculum of the English schools has much in common with English schools throughout the world: emphasis is placed
on the acquisition of the 3 R's in the primary school, and in the secondary school one finds English, mathematics, history, geography and probably science as the core of the curriculum. But throughout the schools great emphasis has to be placed on acquiring facility in the use of the English language. The majority of children now enrolling in the schools come from non-English speaking homes, and the major task in the first two standards of the Primary School is the acquisition of the elements of the English language. At the beginning of each school year in January, a teacher, perhaps Chinese or Indian, whose principal language is English, will be faced by forty children, the majority of whom speak either Malay, Tamil, Cantonese or Hokkien at home. The only language shared may be a few words of English or Malay, but with the aid of gestures, labels and actions the children learn to speak English. In the secondary schools the emphasis is still on language and not on literature — set books are studied but very few other books are read, i.e. for the pupils and many teachers English is a skill to be acquired, not a "humanity" to be studied. Whilst one can be critical about the standard of English attained — the methods of teaching are not the product of systematic investigation and the time spent in teaching English could probably be used much more economically — one must recognise that Malayan students who study in English-speaking countries overseas have a better command of English than many other Asian students. As schools are extended or new schools built, science laboratories are installed — they are to be found, of course, more often in boys’ schools than girls’. General Science is studied for the School Certificate examination and afterwards the separate sciences, physics, chemistry and biology.

Although art and to a lesser extent handwork are taught, the treatment of the curriculum is verbal and academic, and directed towards the School Certificate; neither parents nor teachers would desire it otherwise. Teaching and other white-collar occupations have better salaries and greater security than manual occupations, and so long as the education system continues to expand rapidly, interest will be concentrated on acquiring a School Certificate. The development of secondary modern and technical schools with their emphasis on crafts, art, physical education and domestic science, or technical training, will have to wait until primary education for all, with its great demand for teachers, has been provided. That education is too verbal, that words are clichés or meaningless counters, that teaching is too much a matter of doling out sections of text-books