

DEBATING VERNACULAR SCHOOL SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MULTI-LINGUAL LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

The vernacular school system in Malaysia has long been controversial, with national integration a focal point. Oftentimes, the range of voices over issue definition and interpretation is linked to a process of inter-ethnic negotiation and contestation with media becoming an important platform for public debate. Building on the notion that media framing has important implications for public discussion and government policy through content selection and emphasis, the present study analyses the framing of the vernacular school system in the news coverage of Malaysia's multi-lingual newspapers. A total of 555 news stories published throughout 2015 were content analyzed. It was found that both Chinese and Malay language newspapers have somewhat different focus in that they were primarily concerned with reporting education issues from a specific ethnic perspective. Interestingly, the English newspaper with its mostly English-educated, ethnically more diverse readership inclined to provide a big-picture understanding of the issue under study. Results of the study suggest that the ethnic focus of Chinese and Malay newspapers posed an obstacle to reporting on diversity and thus limiting the experience of their readers in a culturally homogenous setting despite their popularity. One strength of the English newspaper lay in the inclusiveness of its coverage where the readers could receive news from every nook and corner of the multi-ethnic society. This study will contribute to the literature on news framing of education issues by providing a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing vernacular schools, which could serve as a consideration of the government policy-making process towards equitable development of public education at all levels.

Keywords: framing, vernacular education, national integration, ethnic identity, Malaysian media

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1. INTRODUCTION

Being regarded as a vibrant, multi-ethnic country, Malaysia is home to the indigenous Malay community (68.8%) and non-Malay groups of Chinese and Indians (23.2% and 7.0%) respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). The nature of the state itself is largely built upon the demographic profile of multi-ethnicity and it is always through the lens of ethnicity to understand the national policy agenda in its major domains. According to Crouch (2001), the all-pervading force of ethnicity is present in almost all policy spheres including language, education, government employment, business licenses, immigration, internal security, and foreign policy. This situation has brought the state government to the political foreground, particularly the role it plays to reconcile inter-ethnic competing interests arising from contestation over economic resources, control of political power, and cultural space (Haque, 2003; Hazri & Santhiram, 2012).

Ethnicity remains a key component in the education policy process (Brown, 2007). At present, there are parallel government-funded schools of three language streams, i.e. national primary schools teaching in the Malay language (the national language) and national-type primary schools using Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction. All schools adopt a similar curriculum regardless of the language of instruction and Malay is made a compulsory subject (Collins, 2006; Crouch 2001). The promulgation of *Razak* Report in 1956 has allowed the continuity of British colonial legacy and the incorporation of a vernacular school system in a national educational framework to cater to the ethnic minorities' interests and needs in the respective mother tongue education (Santhiram & Tan, 2010, 2015).

The vernacular school system, however, has been controversial, with national integration a focal point. The state's ideology of national integration with great emphasis on Malay cultural dominance and the legitimization of Malay language as both national and official language in the public domain and education sector has become a major concern for non-Malays. This has also aroused suspicion of the state's interest in the idea of assimilation along with fears and apprehensions among members of ethnic minorities, especially Chinese about an imminent threat to their ethnic cultural and linguistic identity via education means. As argued by a few scholars, the diverse ethnic linguistic needs in the education sector, among others become one of the "major domains of ethnic contestation" (Haque, 2003, p. 240), a "contested terrain of multiple aspirations" (Hazri & Santhiram, 2012, p. 20) or "[a site of] dominant-subordinate struggle" (Chernov Hwang & Sadiq, 2010).

The debate over whether multiple streams of primary schools can co-exist and fit in with the state agenda of national integration continues to keep the ethnic-based issue top of the national agenda and headline-grabbing news in media. Oftentimes, the range of voices over issue definition and interpretation as represented and reflected in media is linked to a process of inter-ethnic negotiation and contestation. Some researchers contend that it remains a challenging undertaking by Malaysian government to deal with politically and ethnically divisive issue in the formulation and implementation of education policy in relation to national integration (Brown, 2007;

Hazri & Santhiram, 2012; Santhiram & Tan, 2010; Tan & Sezali, 2015).

Aside from religion, education has been a challenging area of reporting given the sensitivity attached to Malay's cultural dominance vis-à-vis claims for cultural autonomy from ethnic Chinese and Indians. As Halimahton, Ngu and Rahman (2006, p. 185) succinctly put it, "the media have to constantly tread on precarious ground, balancing between what to write and how to write it" in a multi-cultural society abounding with religious and racial sensitivities. A similar view is expressed by Faridah, Chang and Kuik (2012, p. 9) by stating that the onus lies on media practitioners "to strike a careful balance between what to report and how to report [ethnicity issues]."

It is worth noting the tendency of ethnic-oriented media in Malaysia to accord the primacy to articulation of specific ethnic concerns and interests over issues that matter most to their readerships, e.g. the Moorthy and Nyonya Tahir cases (Halimahton, Ngu & Rahman, 2006), the *keris* polemics (Yang & Md. Sidin, 2014), the Lina Joy controversy (Yang & Md. Sidin, 2011). In the meantime, the presence of dual constraints, i.e. ownership and legislation (Azizuddin, 2014; Brown, 2005; Mustafa, 2010; Steele, 2009; Wang, 2001; Weiss, 2012) inform these Malay, Tamil, and Chinese language press, first and foremost, of their priority to keenly attune to the government's developmental efforts and its key ideological underpinnings irrespective of whose ethnic interests the media represent. Occasionally, the media find themselves on the horns of a dilemma and this becomes apparent in the challenge facing them, i.e. how to find the middle ground between bottom-up and top-down expectations (Faridah, Chang & Kuik, 2012).

Doing ethnic reporting in education has been and will always remain a challenge for journalists and media organizations (Faridah, Chang & Kuik, 2012). This is more so in the Internet age as the advent of new media has shifted the ways in which news and information are gathered, disseminated, and used by journalists and the public alike. The process of framing is not just a function of journalistic practices and editorial policies in the newsroom, and thus leaves little room for other individuals in the society to exert an impact on the content of news. Journalists rely on news sources in making news and according to the indexing model coined by Bennett (2009), the range of views is hierarchically arrayed in accordance to "levels of conflict among public officials and established interests involved in making decisions about an issue." An array of news sources who are the political and social actors vie with one another in a maneuver to strategically frame messages of their preference and bring about attitudinal changes among the audience. When journalists employ frames, certain aspects of reality are selected and highlighted which aim at shifting audiences' attitudes and opinion toward a certain issue.

Thus, it is within this context that this study examines the role of mainstream newspapers in reporting the vernacular school system which remains as a highly controversial issue fraught with tension and antagonism in their respective news coverage. Previous studies have examined the framing pattern of a single controversial language policy issue by local newspapers (Chang, Faridah, Fauziah & Chew, 2012;

Chang, Musa & Fauziah, 2012; Samuel, Khan, Lee & Cheang, 2012; Yang & Md. Sidin, 2012), but little is known about the media discourse of vernacular school system and its implications for national identity vis-à-vis ethnic consciousness. Research on the framing of national education issue is of great importance due to “the power of a communicating text” through an emphasis on content selection and salience so as to influence government policy and public opinion (Entman, 1993).

1.1 *Research objective and research questions*

The present study aims to examine the news coverage of vernacular school system in mainstream newspapers of three language streams comprising a Malay paper *Utusan Malaysia*, Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Daily*, and English daily *The Star*. The research questions in this study are:

- RQ 1: What are the similarities and differences between the mainstream newspaper coverage of vernacular school system in terms of news character?
- RQ 2: What is the dominant source used in the mainstream newspaper coverage of vernacular school system?
- RQ 3: What are the topics highlighted in the coverage of vernacular school system by the mainstream newspapers?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Ethnic politics and vernacular school system in Malaysia*

One prominent feature of the political system in Malaysia lies in its ethnic politics (Hagiwara, 1972; Segawa, 2013). Six decades after its independence, the country has been ruled by BN (*Barisan Nasional* or National Front) coalition of three major ethnic-based political parties, namely UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). Similar to its predecessor Alliance coalition, the establishment of BN coalition in 1973 was aimed to accommodate the communal interests and demands of Malays and non-Malays.

The opposition PR (*Pakatan Rakyat* or People’s Alliance) was a coalition of DAP (Democratic Action Party), PKR (People’s Justice Party), and PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party). These political parties, too, are largely ethnic-based, and deal mainly with ethnic-related issues (Segawa, 2013). However, the attempt by PAS’s president Hadi Awang to implement *hudud* law led to the collapse of the PR coalition (Mustafa, 2015). Recently, it was reported that a new opposition coalition, consisting DAP, PKR, Amanah (National Trust Party), and former prime minister Dr. Mahathir-led Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia was formed (Arfa & Laili, 2017). The political development in post-Independent Malaysia, argued by scholars, is a continuation of British colonial policy (Haque, 2003; Rizal, 2014; Segawa, 2013).

Against this ethnic politics backdrop, there is a growing concern over how to accommodate diverse ethnic interests and reconcile competing ethnic claims. It has led the importance of education to the endeavor of national integration for BN ruling coalition since independence until present. Like the political system,

the development of national education system has its historical roots in the period of British colonization. Apart from colonial policy, the setting up of multi-lingual schools for children of Malays, Chinese, and Indians came into effect in tandem with the strong communal sentiments at the time (Hazri & Santhiram, 2012; Tan & Sezali, 2015). The promulgation of *Razak* Report in 1956 has allowed for the co-existence of three types of schools using a different medium of instruction after the phasing out of English medium schools gradually in the late 1960s. They are national primary schools teaching in the Malay language, Chinese primary schools, and Tamil primary schools (Tan, Kamarudin & Sezali, 2013).

The vernacular school system has been the subject of much considerable debate, with national integration a focal point. There are different interpretations of national integration through education. Supporters, the majority of whom are ethnic Chinese and Indians, frame vernacular schools around retention and maintenance of their age-old cultural heritage as it serves an important tool to preserve their cultural and linguistic identities. Opponents, who are politically dominant ethnic Malays, frame the issue around the polarizing feature of multi-lingual set up of education in national integration. As such, the latter favors a single stream education system in Malay. As a result, vernacular education finds itself at an impasse and on the periphery of national educational policy development. Facing the challenges to their mother-tongue education, Lee (2011) described that vernacular education in Malaysia was engaged in “the struggle for survival.”

2.2 *Media system in Malaysia and dual constraints on press freedom*

Most of the mainstream media are ethnically aligned as evidenced by the presence of a specific ethnic dimension in their articulation of concerns and interests over issues and events concerning the specific ethnic community. Among the 50 dailies available in Malaysia, 16 of them are English-medium publication, 13 published in Malay, 19 in Chinese medium and 2 in Tamil (Yang & Md. Sidin, 2014). Unlike the English language media with a more ethnically diverse readership, the other ethnic newspapers are seen to express the dominant voice of the ethnic group they represent and more importantly their role of being the defender of cultural identity. This can be seen from the media representation of issues concerning education in which it is an important site for scrutinizing “bundles of consistent issue arguments, originally proposed by proponents and opponents [who have a stake in the dispute]” (Matthes, 2012, p. 254).

The control of mass media in Malaysia has become a key area of research in scholarly work with the main focus on dual constraints, i.e. ownership and legislation (Azizuddin, 2014; Brown, 2005; Mustafa, 2010; Steele, 2009; Wang, 2001; Weiss, 2012). Mass media in print or broadcast in Malaysia are directly or indirectly owned by the government and its closely linked individuals. The public broadcaster Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) that consists of TV1, TV2, TVi, and other radio stations is controlled and run by the government. An UMNO-linked private media conglomerate, Media Prima, owns four free-to-air television channels - TV3, 8TV, TV9, NTV7; a few mainstream Malay and English language newspapers - *Harian Metro*, *Berita Harian*,

New Straits Times, *Malay Mail*, as well as Fly FM, Hot FM, and One FM. Another corporation closely linked to UMNO, Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad owns *Utusan Malaysia*, *Kosmo*, and several Malay language magazines. MCA holding company Huaren Holdings controls not only most of the mainstream Chinese newspapers but also the top English newspaper in circulation, *The Star*. The two Tamil newspapers *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* are owned by the former MIC president and his wife. Malaysia's billionaire, Vincent Tan who is a close friend of Dr. Mahathir owns *The Sun*, business weekly *The Edge*, and *Asia Inc.* (Mustafa; 2010; Weiss, 2012; Yang & Md. Sidin, 2014). The state ownership of various media has led some scholars to argue against the involvement of editors and journalists in self-censorship (Brown, 2005; Mustafa, 2010; Wang, 2001; Weiss, 2012) and thus limiting the boundary of discourse to what is deemed acceptable by official rhetoric and private interests.

Media in Malaysia are also subject to threats of punishments posed by various legislative laws. Over the years, the government has sought to use various laws such as Printing Presses and Publication Act, Internal Security Act, and Sedition Act as a form of stringent surveillance to censor content and limit critical voices. The Internal Security Act was abolished and replaced by Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012. However, numerous concerns were raised over the new piece of legislation in view of the tensions between national security and civic liberty. Spiegel (2012, p. 1) expresses her view that the new Act "does not go far enough to protect the fundamental rights and freedom." A prominent communication scholar Prof. Zaharom Nain (2013, p. 170) argues that the regulation has led journalists working in "[...] an environment of self-censorship, where [journalists] keep within narrow parameters, fearful for their jobs and, also, for their liberty." Brown (2005) considers the dual strategy as a double-edged sword for BN to control its domination of the media industry and a means to facilitate the differing interests of parties and factions within the BN coalition.

In the late 1990s, the government pledge of no internet censorship in the Bill of Guarantee facilitated the growth of internet journalism in Malaysia. Most notably, alternative voices that were denied spaces in mainstream media found a relatively free platform, and thus most likely changing the landscape of social mobilization and politics (Lumsden, 2013; Weiss, 2012). A hands-off intervention on the Internet, described by Lumsden (2013, p. 7) as having "the unintended effect of opening a crack in governmental barriers to political expression [...] that opened a flood of challenges to Malaysia's media and political hegemony." The establishment of the first commercial Internet newspaper, *Malaysiakini* in 1999 was seen as a democratic space capable of challenging the authoritarianism of BN (Steele, 2009), a test to legislative constraints of media control by the government (Brown, 2005), and thus contributing to participatory democracy by opening up political discourse (Lumsden, 2013).

2.3 News sources

Much research studies have shed light on the news sources'-journalists' relationship and their implications for news reporting. Chang, Musa and Fauziah (2012) define news sources as any individual or organization being quoted by journalists directly

or indirectly in news reports. Gans (1979, p. 80) describes sources as "the actors whom journalists observe or interview, including interviewees who appear on the air or who are quoted in [newspaper] articles, and those who only supply background information or story suggestions." He further explains that sources as providers of information consisting of "members or representatives of organized and unorganized interest groups, and yet larger sectors of nation and society." Based on this notion, news sources can be identified as those players on the scene including politicians, education movements, educators, non-governmental organizations, columnists, editors, journalists, and members of the public who may be quoted for their opinion on the vernacular school system for the present study.

Some scholars comment that power has come into play and news content is a function of dominant ideology (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993; Gans, 1979). Gans (1979, p. 81) describes the sources-journalists interplay as a form of tug-of-war and the news is "the exercise of power over the interpretation of reality." While Carragee and Roefs (2004) lament the neglect of power in news content research, Vliegthart (2012) emphasizes the need to consider the factor of political power in understanding the variation in news content. This may imply that an array of sources vies with one another in a maneuver to strategically present messages of their preference, and those in power will get more coverage in news, and as such their point of view will likely be heard more often than others. Mustafa (2006) points to the fact that the mainstream media in Malaysia are more predisposed to taking a cue from the powers-that-be in doing news reporting.

The tendency of journalists' reliance on sources for information has also led a few researchers to argue that the relationship should be understood in terms of interdependency or symbiosis (Herman & Chomsky, 1998; Louw, 2010). The propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1998) suggests the predominance of powerful sources or "primary definers" in news coverage by manufacturing public consent. The interdependency is based upon "[the] mutual interests and relationships between the media and those who make the news and have the power to define it and explain what it means." It is clear that sources need media to publicize on-going political activities, to personalize self-image appealing to an audience, and to counter-attack rivals' unfavorable discourses. Media, on the other hand, need legitimate sources for sound bites and news bites. As political activities become heavily mediated, Strömbäck (2008) also raises the concern if politics and society can sustain without the media. Thus, mass media as an intermediary between ruling groups and the people not only enhances communicative power of the policymakers but also empowers the former to seek legitimacy and consent of the latter in the political process.

Despite the manifest top-down communication, journalists, to a great extent are not passive in conveying information put forth by news sources. Bartholomé, Lecheler and Vreese (2015) found the active role of journalists in intervening conflict reporting. Based on in-depth interviews with a group of 16 Dutch political journalists, their study revealed the influence of journalists in conflict news reporting, and this is

due to journalistic routines. An earlier study by Brüggemann (2014) also supported the notion of journalists contributing to news framing to some degree.

2.4 News framing

Framing has broad appeal in both scholarly and real worlds. The commonality of a frame in scholarly discourse led some scholars to postulate framing took precedence over other media effects theory, particularly agenda setting in the field of political communication (Vliegenthart, 2012; Weaver, 2007). Along these lines, Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) identify the three media effects models - agenda setting, framing, and priming - as the most recent paradigm shift in political communication research. In a real-life setting, frames are “endogenous to the political and social world” (Vreese, 2005, p. 53) and culturally embedded (Van Gorp, 2010). The outcome of media representation of political and social realities reflects what Lippman (1922) has described as “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” or in Cohen’s (1963, p. 13) observation of the mediated effects, “the [media] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what [and how] to think about.”

Due to these reasons, framing is becoming a powerful and useful tool to content analyze news coverage on a range of political issues and events as these differences in presentation style may imply the linkages between the multiplicity of factors shaping the news content as well as the important implications on public opinion and government policy. In one of the most widely cited definitions, Entman (1993, p. 52) defines framing as “[a process] to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” It implies not all aspects of an issue or event were treated in an equal manner in the news selection process. An emphasis in prominence on some elements of a topic renders them visible in media while the exclusion of others might have similar appearance under alternative framing. Gitlin (2003, p.7) defines frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.” In doing so, differences in the mode of presentation of a given issue might lead to different reactions.

Elements of frames appear in the form of text or visual or a combination of both. Entman (1993) suggests the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments signifying frames. To identify and measure frames in news, Tankard (2003) itemizes a list of framing mechanisms including headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads, selection of quotes, selection of source, etc.

In general, there are two types of news frames: issue-specific and generic (Vreese, 2005). Issue-specific frames vary from one issue to another. For example, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identify “progress”, “runaway”, “public accountability” frames

in their empirical study of media account on nuclear power. Generic frames, on the other hand, transcend thematic limitations as they can be identified across different topics. Iyengar (1991) found thematic and episodic framing of social issues in news. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identify five news frames: conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, morality, and economic consequences. These news frames are extracted either by the inductive or deductive approach. Taking an inductive approach, frames are derived from a pre-study and then defined in the codebook. In the deductive approach, researchers are looking for frames that are defined a priori to the analysis (Vreese, 2005).

News content of education issue is value-laden. It must be acknowledged that news stories are socially constructed and as such the news production process is conditioned by a host of factors that potentially have an impact on the content of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Vreese, 2005; Zhou & Moy, 2007). Shoemaker and Reese (2014) draw insights from a sociological perspective on content studies by linking it to the interactions between individuals both residing within and lying beyond media organization in relation to broader socio-cultural context. They call this interconnected web of influences a hierarchical model spanning multiple levels of analysis. A distinction can be drawn between the internal and external factors that shape news content or frames in news. Internal factors refer to individual characteristics of journalists, their ideological leanings, professional values, journalistic routines, and organizational constraints while external factors are the interactions between journalists and news sources (Vreese, 2005; Zhou & Moy, 2007).

A review of framing literature in Malaysia’s education system points to the inclination to examine the framing pattern of a single controversial language policy issue – PPSMI (also known by its Malay acronym, *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris*) by different language streams of national newspapers. Drawing from a systematic or more interpretive approach, these studies focus on the frame-building aspect by exploring how different perspectives were put forth in the process of discursive contestation over the policy at two stages, before and after the decision of policy reversal was made (Chang, Faridah, Fauziah & Chew, 2012; Chang, Musa & Fauziah, 2012; Samuel, Khan, Lee & Cheang, 2012; Yang & Md. Sidin, 2012).

Yang and Md. Sidin (2012) quantitatively content analyze the news coverage of PPSMI reversal in four local dailies and findings of their study suggest that mainstream and alternative media have framed the issue differently. While the mainstream media tend to play more of surveillance than an interpretation role, the alternative media take a different course by being a watchdog as evident in their counter-hegemonic discourse. A discursive analytical study was conducted by Samuel, Khan, Lee and Cheang (2012) to scrutinize the debate on language policy in education from a specific ethnic perspective. Drawing the sample from a Chinese language daily, the study showed how the differing viewpoints by a variety of sources were quoted and framed in such a way as to better position itself vis-à-vis a state policy agenda. In two other studies, Chang, Musa and Fauziah (2012) and Chang, Faridah, Fauziah and

Chew (2012) have examined the frame preference of news sources and their relative influence over news media respectively. The results of these studies suggested that news sources gain an upper hand over media in determining the dominant frame used to define a controversial issue. The authors also assert that the outcome of a frame is the result of the interaction between news sources and media workers.

The relationship between media and education has also attracted interests of international scholars and educators alike. A study by Wilby (2016) found that the politicization and centralization of education have led to an explosion of media interest in the UK. He says the education issues were mainly covered as the progressive-traditional battles, and politicians harnessed the communication power by encouraging journalists to cover education in terms of this dichotomy. Drawing on a content analysis of education news across various media platforms, O'Neil (2012) discovers that the media discourse of U.S. education system is framed in terms of crisis, consumerist, and classroom bubble. The consumerist frame is frequently used in which the education system should be run like a business in the private sector in order to improve education outcomes. U.S. media also portray learning as distinct from the policy environments in which it occurs, resulting in the classroom bubble frame. The crisis frame emphasizes the dire problems the system faces while failing to offer concrete and feasible solutions. The author reveals the media presented a narrow story of education when compared to the stories that education advocates and experts want to disseminate.

3. METHOD

Frames in the news can be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone (Weaver, 2007). Quantitative content analysis has been used in framing studies of education reporting in newspapers (Chang, Faridah, Fauziah & Chew, 2012; Chang, Musa & Fauziah, 2012; Yang & Md. Sidin, 2012). According to Krippendorff (2013), content analysis is a method which enables researchers to make replicable and valid inferences from texts or other meaningful matter relative to the contexts of their use. Similarly, Kerlinger (1986) defines it as “a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables.”

3.1 Data sampling

Three different language mainstream dailies - *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star*, and *Sin Chew Daily* were chosen for this study based on two reasons. First, these nationally distributed newspapers have a good reputation among the community they serve. Being the oldest Malay language press in Malaysia, *Utusan Malaysia* has always been perceived as the mouthpiece of UMNO (Azizuddin, 2014). The two serious newspapers, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* are highly-esteemed and are popular among the well-educated professionals. Second, these papers enjoy highest circulation rates as compared to others of the same ilk. In the second half of 2016, *Utusan Malaysia* (with

its weekend edition *Utusan Mingguan*) recorded a daily circulation of 406,537. The print circulation of *The Star* (including weekend edition *Sunday Star*) has a record of 440,209 copies daily and *Sin Chew Daily*'s circulation is 323,616 (Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, 2017).

The unit of analysis was the individual news stories consisting spot news, editorials, and opinion articles published in the national news section of three mainstream newspapers. Sampling period ran from 1 January to 31 December 2015. This time period was selected because it coincided with several important events, including the call for English-medium schools, Chinese education movement's leadership crisis, and the proposal to abolish vernacular schools. Only the items associated with the vernacular school system and its related issues were included for analysis. To ease the search for news articles either through electronically browsing newspaper archives or manually searching physical newspapers, a few keywords were identified and referred to following a review of the literature. They include vernacular schools, mother-tongue education, language policy, multi-stream education system, and so on. This search yielded a total of 555 articles.

3.2 Coding categorizations

The coding structure was separated into three parts – news character, news source, and news topic. In the first part, news character was measured from the aspects of the amount of news and the type of articles. All items collected were coded into categories of spot news, editorials, and opinion articles. Next, the news sources refer to providers of information being quoted in newspaper articles which comprise “members or representatives of organized and unorganized interest groups, and yet larger sectors of nation and society” (Gans, 1979, p. 80). This source list included categories such as 1) policy-makers (ruling coalition government, national, and local education authority), 2) opposition leaders, 3) stakeholder groups (interest groups, teacher unions, school committees, parents, pupils), 4) editorials, 5) opinion (letters to the editors, commentary writers), and 6) others.

As for news topic, an inductive approach was used to extract the main themes in the data. Numerous scholars have employed the inductive approach to framing analysis (Howells, 2012; Segvic, 2005). Matthes and Kohring (2008) called this a manual holistic approach and it is one among other commonly used methods to identify and measure frames. The coding process started with a careful reading and reviewing of 100 randomly selected news articles to get an overview of the issue under study. Manual coding of data resulted in 12 coding categories in relation to the vernacular school system. All data were coded based on the coding categories established in the pretest. The operational definitions of these news topics are as follows:

1. **Enrolments** – highlights the dilemma of under-enrolled or over-crowded Chinese schools; preference for vernacular schools among non-Chinese parents
2. **Developments funds** – focuses on the allocation and management of

- development funding for vernacular schools; the engagement of local businesses and community organizations in providing financial resources to schools; and fundraising activities to boost school budget
3. **Teaching force** – emphasizes the problem of teacher shortage in Chinese schools; teacher transfer and placement issue; as well as incentives and recruitment for teachers
 4. **School curriculum** – underscores the transformation and improvement in teaching and learning approaches in line with a revised Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR); the introduction of a new format for Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR); and the use of ICT for education
 5. **Single-stream national education** – focuses on the need to establish a single-stream education system using *Bahasa Malaysia* as the medium of instruction to promote national integration; the Malay language literacy and selection of *Bahasa Malaysia* textbooks for vernacular schools
 6. **English-medium schools** – highlights the call for English-medium schools following Singapore's success in uniting people of all races; enhanced English skills through Uphold *Bahasa Malaysia* and Strengthen the English Language policy (MBMMBI)
 7. **Multi-stream education** – focuses on the need to defend vernacular schools as an integral part of the national education system; rebuttal to allegation concerning vernacular schools as a stumbling block to national unity; the importance of Chinese language for economic development; and the UPSR Chinese paper issue
 8. **Haze problem** – focuses on school closure due to worsening haze situation
 9. **Leadership crisis** – focuses on the factional conflicts in the leading Chinese education movement, *Dong Zong* that has led to court intervention
 10. **Parental involvement** – focuses on the working relationship between parents and school administration; as well as the role of Parent-Teacher Association (PIBG)
 11. **Unity through education** – focuses on the importance of education for national development in line with the national priority to achieve a high-income country; the involvement of schools in Independence Day celebration and parade; and the selection of history textbook
 12. **Others** – any other topic that does not belong to the above-mentioned topics
- Two student coders were employed to code the samples. Using Holsti's formula (Holsti, 1969) of $R=2M/N1+N2$ (M is the total items agreed upon; N1 and N2 refer to the coding decision made by coders 1 and 2 respectively), the inter-coder reliability was conducted on a subsample of 100 randomly chosen articles. Inter-coder agreement percentage was 90% for news source and 79% for news topic. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the distribution of

a variable numerically. Some scholars have offered a descriptive analysis of media coverage on topics such as interethnic conflict (Yang & De Rycker, 2017), international relations (Teoh, Yang & Neo, 2016), political crisis (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012), activism (Duncan-Shippy, Murphy & Purdy, 2017), and education (Yang & Md. Sidin, 2012).

4. FINDINGS

4.1 News character

Table 1 shows that *Sin Chew Daily* devoted the highest proportion (245 items) to the issue of the vernacular school system as compared to *The Star* (211 items) and *Utusan Malaysia* (99 items). All newspapers had a much higher ratio of spot news to the opinion pieces. The Chinese and English newspapers had very few items on editorial (1.22% and 1.42% respectively), but their Malay counterpart devoted no editorial opinion to the issue under study.

Table 1. News character

News type	Sin Chew Daily		The Star		Utusan Malaysia	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Spot news	213	86.94	150	71.09	81	81.82
Editorials	3	1.22	3	1.42	0	0
Opinion articles	29	11.84	58	27.49	18	18.18
Total	245	100	211	100	99	100

4.2 News source

Table 2 indicates that all newspapers focused strongly on the policy-makers as the main source of news, especially top leaders of BN component parties. *Sin Chew Daily* devoted 37.96% news coverage to the stakeholder groups of Chinese education movement and Chinese guilds. The Chinese daily has also drawn material from a wide range of news sources as compared to its counterparts. As for the English and Malay dailies, both had allocated some space to opinion writers (27.49% and 18.18% respectively) and stakeholder groups (19.43% and 11.11% respectively). All newspapers devoted very few or no coverage to opposition leaders for their viewpoints on the issue under study.

Table 2. News source

News source	Sin Chew Daily		The Star		Utusan Malaysia	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Policy-makers	99	40.41	96	45.50	62	62.62
Opposition leaders	7	2.86	0	0	0	0
Stakeholder groups	93	37.96	41	19.43	11	11.11
Editorials	3	1.22	3	1.42	0	0
Opinion	29	11.84	58	27.49	18	18.18
Others	14	5.71	13	6.16	8	8.08
Total	245	100	211	100	99	100

4.3 News topic

4.3.1 Sin Chew Daily

The Chinese newspaper had most items on multi-stream education (23.27%) focusing on its substantial economic benefits, not a hindrance to national unity for the country. Top gun of the Chinese-predominated political party - MCA more often than not was left without much choice but to reassure Chinese community that multi-lingual education will be upheld in response to the critics of vernacular schools. For example, MCA president Liow Tiong Lai said the claim that vernacular schools was a stumbling block to national integration was short-sighted and served only to damage the forefather's legacy in nation-building. He asserted the right of every Malaysian to learn one's mother tongue for which the principle was indisputable ("Liow: Right to learn mother-tongue indisputable," 2015). Deputy education minister Chong Sin Woon added the multilingual feature of education system gives the country an edge in the education market to attract students from China and this is in line with Malaysia's aspiration to become a regional education hub ("Chong: Multi-stream education a competitive edge," 2015).

Editorials and opinion pieces published in *Sin Chew Daily* were also concerned with race-based education remarks by top office-bearer, especially the top leader of UMNO. One author explicitly blamed ethnic politics for causing and promoting racial disharmony, instead of multi-stream education. He mentioned the ethnic-based political parties hardly move beyond a dichotomous view of "us" and "them" in efforts to mobilize support and loyalty of voters and members to their advocated position. The vernacular school system has always been an easy scapegoat to blame for wider problems under such circumstances, he added (Zhang, 2015). While criticizing the "irresponsible" statement made by the politicians, the editorial board has referred to a Malay proverb "*jangan cakap tak serupa bikin*" to remind UMNO top leaders to walk the talk by assuring the Chinese community that vernacular schools will continue to exist ("Editorial: *Jangan cakap tak serupa bikin*," 2015).

The leadership crisis topic (15.51%) was prominent in *Sin Chew Daily*. A considerable amount of coverage was concentrated on one of the most respectful education movement groups - *Dong Zong* controversy between two rival camps, one led by former president Yap Sin Tian and the other by the reformist group linked to secretary-general Poh Chin Chuan. The bitter feud over power struggle ended with a new committee line-up recognized by the Selangor Registrar of Societies. As the crisis deepened and seemed to undermine the foundation of Chinese education, Chinese guilds and associations urged the two factions to value the spirit of unity and continue to collaborate with Chinese groups for the betterment of Chinese education. For example, Federation of Chinese Associations of Malaysia president Pheng Yin Huah said the crisis has caused great harm to the Chinese community and both parties shall begin negotiations to end the dispute ("Pheng: Working together for Chinese education," 2015). Editorial and opinion writers expressed deep dissatisfaction and disappointment over the leadership tussle and they unanimously described the long-drawn dispute as bringing shame to the Chinese community. One opinion article pointed out *Dong Zong* was no longer an object of pride as the leadership crisis threatened to push Chinese education to the brink of collapse and tarnished the Chinese educationalists' image (Zheng, 2015).

The Chinese daily devoted 14.69% of its news pages to the coverage of teaching force, particularly teacher shortage at Chinese primary schools. It was reported that the education ministry should be held to blame for long-standing teacher shortage problems that plague Chinese schools. Chinese education group blamed the former for not taking the job seriously ("Jiao Zong: Decades-old teacher shortage problem," 2015). Despite Chinese educationalist criticism, Chong Sin Woon said that the education ministry will be sending enough trained teachers to fill the vacancies and he expected the problem to be solved in the next school year ("Chong: No teacher shortage," 2015). *Sin Chew Daily* also published development funds (13.88%) and single-stream education (13.06%) more frequently than other topics. MCA top leaders reassured the Chinese community on a few official occasions that the BN-led government will be fair in allocating funds as promised in Budget 2015 amidst heightened concerns over the delay in allocations ("Chong: I have confidence," 2015). Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Dr. Wee Ka Siong also dismissed opposition allegations of bias in allocating funds to Chinese schools ("Wee: Lim's allegation not true," 2015). The language of medium policy pertaining to the proposal to unify Bahasa Malaysia curriculum and examination format for national and vernacular schools, on the other hand, has caused uneasiness among the Chinese community. Debates flared in the media and it was met with resistance from MCA leaders and Chinese education movement who think that the nation shall respect what was laid out in the Malaysia Education Blueprint ("Wee: BM textbooks," 2015). It is worth noting that no coverage was devoted to parental involvement topic.

4.3.2 *The Star*

A substantial proportion of coverage was devoted to English-medium school topic (23.22%). During an exclusive interview with *The Star*, the Sultan of Johor made a strong case for English to be used as the language of instruction in schools following the success of Singapore's education policy (Wong & Benjamin, 2015). The royal call received an overwhelming support across stakeholder groups mainly those English-educated parents and teachers who were concerned with the poor language proficiency among students ("Royal call," 2015; Kok, 2015a). The editorial board also stressed a need to equip students with language skills as "there is no denying that it is the English language that holds the key" ("Knowing English," 2015). However, Dr. Mahathir disagreed with reintroducing English-medium schools but maintained that Science and Mathematics should be taught in English ("Teach maths and science," 2015).

The English daily also focused considerably on the multi-stream education (14.22%) and school curriculum (10.43%) topics. When opening Gerakan's national delegates conference, Prime Minister Najib gave his assurance that the vernacular school system will continue to exist as it was part of the country's social contract (Kanyakumari & Chan, 2015). Top leaders of MCA and Chinese educationalists lauded Najib's assurance for keeping with the social contract agreed by the country's founding fathers. MCA president was quoted as saying that Chinese schools had become a strength to help the country in moving forward economically given the rise of China as a great economic power ("MCA and Chinese educators," 2015). It was also reported that two years after the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was implemented, positive changes have been made. The then education minister Muhyiddin Yassin told all parties not to rest on their laurels but to continue to give full commitment in making sure best results are achieved in every transformation initiative ("Results of Education Blueprint," 2015).

The Star devoted 9.95% and 8.53% of coverage to teaching force and development funds topics respectively. It raised concern over the readiness of the teaching force and the English competency of teachers with the implementation of Dual Language Programme (DLP). One opinion writer, however, remarked local English teachers were equally good as those native English speaking teachers (NESTs), but oftentimes the former was overlooked due to a stereotyped perception among the majority of parents (Kok, 2015b). MCA vice-president Chew Mei Fun, referring to financial assistance to schools, urged the state government not to sideline schools led by MCA members (Chong, 2015). The Chinese-predominated political party also promised to seek more funds for the development of Chinese schools under Budget 2016 (Beh, 2015). There was variation in the proportion of coverage given to all topic categories in the issue under study. A handful of parental involvement news items (1.42%) made their way into the English newspaper news page.

4.3.3 *Utusan Malaysia*

News articles in *Utusan Malaysia* concentrated on teaching force topic (25.25%). The topic paid little attention to the shortage of teachers at Chinese schools but mostly highlighted the teacher quality and positive contribution teachers make in society. For example, education director-general Dr. Khair Mohamad Yusof was quoted as saying that the new challenges facing teachers were to develop holistic, well-rounded students along intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions as laid out in the education blueprint. He said as such there was a necessity to equip teachers with ICT skills for enhanced teaching and learning experience (Hakimi, 2015). A human interest story was published on teacher's day featuring the then Minister of Education II Idris Jusoh who expressed his gratitude to teachers from different ethnic background being the driving force behind his success (Farhana, 2015).

The Malay newspaper devoted 19.19% of news coverage to "other" topic. It has focused mainly on the announcement and analysis of UPSR results. For example, it was reported that the students' performance in 2015 UPSR saw a 0.02 point increase and the urban-rural disparity in school performance was shrinking (Juani Munir, 2015; "Closing the urban-rural school's gap," 2015). One opinion writer advised students without straight A's not to give up on their dreams (Fauziah, 2015). The "other" topic also dealt with the news about the parents' concern over the increasing costs of school supplies for their children (Roskhoirah, 2015).

Single-stream national education topic (14.14%) was prominent in *Utusan Malaysia* in relation to the dominant Malay language status and the proposal of setting up a single-stream education system to foster national unity. Ministers, politicians, academicians, and Malay interest groups spoke out for the proposal. Principal Fellow of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA) Dr. Teo Kok Seong was quoted as saying that there was a need to address disunity among Malaysians through the concept of *Gagasan 1Malaysia* ("Set up single-stream education system," 2015). An opinion writer urged the country to look up to those advanced countries including Thailand and Indonesia as models to emulate their success in developing national character through a single-stream education system (Rejab, 2015). No coverage was attributed to the Chinese educationalist controversy in Malay newspaper (refer Table 3).

Table 3. News topic

News topic	Sin Chew Daily		The Star		Utusan Malaysia	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Enrolments	7	2.86	12	5.69	1	1.01
Development funds	34	13.88	18	8.53	7	7.07
Teaching force	36	14.69	21	9.95	25	25.25
School curriculum	8	3.27	22	10.43	10	10.10
Single-stream national education	32	13.06	5	2.37	14	14.14
English-medium schools	7	2.86	49	23.22	6	6.06
Multi-stream education	57	23.27	30	14.22	4	4.04
Haze problem	12	4.90	14	6.64	2	2.02
Leadership crisis	38	15.51	7	3.32	0	0
Parental involvement	0	0	3	1.42	6	6.06
Unity through education	7	2.86	14	6.64	5	5.05
Others	7	2.86	16	7.58	19	19.19
Total	245	100	211	100	99	100

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results showed consistency across the three newspapers in terms of the level of attention given to spot news and a much higher ratio of spot news to opinion pieces. There was slight variability in the proportion of coverage given to editorial opinions, with *Utusan Malaysia* having no editorial on the issue under study. The concentration in hard news can be attributed to the serious nature of newspapers that tend to offer latest news and updates on politics, economics, sports, etc. that are significant to their readers. The editorials and opinion articles contribute to yet another distinctive platform for articulating institutional and elite debate surrounding important issues (Golan and Lukito, 2015) other than spot news. The issue of the vernacular school system was prominent in *Sin Chew Daily*, suggesting that the newspaper is an important cultural source for its community. It also reflects the interdependence of Chinese press, Chinese education, and the Chinese society at large to co-construct community interests in a multi-cultural society (Samuel, Khan, Lee & Cheang, 2012).

As for sourcing practice, all sampled newspapers had taken over the points of view by the ruling coalition in a seemingly uncritical manner, and contrastingly, the dissenting voices were hardly seen or heard in both Malay and English newspapers. A diversity of news sources used by the Chinese daily may seem to reflect the journalistic professionalism of objectivity for which editors and journalists are committed towards unbiased, non-partisan reporting (Bennett, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

However, there is a fine line between objectivity and bias and it is almost impossible for journalists to defend against possible sources of influences in news production. The close media-ruling party relationship and highly regulative media environment have posed great obstacles to mainstream media as the latter inclines to comply with the government's wishes and serve the hegemonic function of those in power (Mustafa, 2014). Empirical evidence in studies by Yang and Md. Sidin (2012), Md. Sidin and Yang (2013), Ihediwa and Md. Sidin (2015) support the notion of the coverage of different issues by mainstream media tilted towards government sources.

The way in which the mainstream newspapers dealt with vernacular school system can be seen from the visibility of news topics top the media agenda. This study found that both Chinese- and Malay-language newspapers have somewhat different focus in that they are primarily concerned with reporting education issues from a specific ethnic perspective. Not surprisingly, Chinese newspaper predominantly highlighted substantive Chinese education issues which remain unresolved for years and thus putting the onus on the BN-led government to resolve concerns of teacher shortage, allocation of development funds, and the preservation of vernacular Chinese schools. On the contrary, Malay newspaper had less interest in problems affecting vernacular schools but focused on news of utmost interest towards members of the Malay community. Much attention had been given to the dominant Malay language status, teacher quality, and positive outcomes resulting from the successful implementation of education transformation initiatives. Interestingly, the English newspaper with its mostly English-educated, ethnically more diverse readership inclined to provide a big-picture understanding of the issue under study. While highlighting the impact of poor English proficiency on the social-economic development of the country, it is also concerned with the plights of vernacular primary schools and initiatives from the government pushing education transformation.

Results suggested that one strength of the English language newspaper lies in the inclusiveness of its coverage where the readers can receive news from every nook and corner of the multi-ethnic society. However, the ethnic focus of Malay- and Chinese-language newspapers poses an obstacle to reporting on diversity. The power of media is determined by its ability to inform the audience what issues are important. Some issues are brought to light while other issues are kept in the dark. The Malay and Chinese newspapers, by operating from what was fundamentally a specific ethnic perspective, have arguably limited the experience of their readers in a culturally homogenous setting despite their popularity.

Unfortunately, as is often the case, people's understanding of education are shaped by the media's portrayal of the issues. A narrow story of education issues in which it is frequently defined as one of interracial conflicts over contesting desires for national identity might obscure the "real" problems and challenges that necessitate collective actions. Due to unfavorable comparisons between the media coverage in relation to the questions of ethnicity and nationalism, the vernacular education system has been made an easy scapegoat. Nevertheless, as far as national integration is concerned, the Malaysian prime minister has sternly warned that the government

will not tolerate disrespectful handling of sensitive issues like religion and race. Najib said, “any news reported, and opinion that is given, must not in any way (disrespect) sensitive issues that can raise the anger of the people” (Ahmad Fairuz, 2017). Media have an important role to play in national development (Wong, 2004) but the question of how well they help people to grasp a true sense of development in a plural society has become more acute.

The main problem of media treatment of ethnic-related issues is that media do not exist in a vacuum and they must consider the interplay of multiple forces having a bearing on media. Ch’ng (2016) argues that media must be understood in relation to other institutions in the wider social and political contexts by taking into consideration “the multifaceted ethnic, linguistic, political and cultural demographic influences on its newspapers.” Similarly, Yang and Md. Sidin (2015) in a qualitative study of newsroom practice also add that news coverage is tied to the political, economic, and ideological forces.

Some scholars consider that the role of perceptions by journalists must be regarded as part of the underlying cause determining the way journalistic values and practices are to be carried out in their routine news gathering process (Ezhar & Ain Nadzimah, 2014; Shao & Nik Norma, 2014). When examining the journalistic roles as perceived by Malaysian journalists, Ezhar & Ain Nadzimah (2014) suggest that the latter was highly supportive of the role of media as interpreter and disseminator. A similar study by Shao and Nik Norma (2014) found that journalists working in Chinese newspapers tend to prioritize the above functions in a multicultural setting.

From another point of view, scholars point to the heightened sense of ethnic consciousness and its implications for national integration. The political problems of ethnic relations in Malaysia as described by Crouch (2001, p. 227) is that “its plural society remains plural, and there is little progress toward ethnic assimilation. Malays remain Malays, and non-Malays remain non-Malays, with their own distinct senses of identity and their own political parties to defend their interests.” Segawa (2013, p. 227) also contends that “[...] the Malaysian political paradigm has yet to demonstrate a clear qualitative shift away from ethnic-based politics. As ethnic consciousness remains pervasive in social, political, and economic terms in Malaysia, implementing a multi-ethnic agenda appears to be difficult.”

In summary, the significance of ethnicity has resulted in a selective emphasis in the media coverage of education issues. The results are consistent with previous studies that support the role of media in articulating their aspiration in line with the specific community that they serve. Given the ethnic orientation of these media, it is not surprising to find that ethnic considerations will be at the forefront of media treatment of ethnicity issues and continue to make their heavy presence on the media agenda.

This study will contribute to the literature on news framing of education issues by providing a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing vernacular schools, which could serve as a consideration of the government policy-making process towards equitable development of public education at all levels. Future

study can build upon this work by including online news to capture the overall media representation of vernacular school system. It would also be interesting to incorporate interviews with policy-makers, stakeholders, and journalists, and compare them with media frame to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how frames emerge and embed in the news.

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