Chapter 7
Changes in the Malaysian School Curriculum from the Pre-independence Years Until the New Millennium

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Abstract This chapter describes the changes in the school curriculum of Malaysia from the period before its Independence until the present period. After describing the meaning and the definition of curriculum to frame the narrative in this chapter, the chapter then goes on to describe the curriculum changes that took place in the Malaysian education system over the period of three different eras. The first era was from the pre-independence years up to 1979, as Malaysia endeavoured to define its nationhood. The next era was from 1980 to 1999, underscored by a major curricular overhaul with the introduction of the KBSR in 1983 and the KBSM in 1988 that put an emphasis on integration of knowledge, skills and values towards producing holistic students. The third era was from 2000 until the present period which saw changes in the medium of instruction twice and the introduction of the KSSR in 2011 followed by KSSM in 2017. The chapter also discusses the catalysts and contexts that bring into effect these changes and explains the success and failures of the changes.

7.1 Introduction

One of the major foci of reforms in the education system of any country, including Malaysia, is the changes made to the school curriculum. The school curriculum structures students' learning experiences, and changes to the curriculum from time to time are aimed at improving the learning experiences of students. This chapter describes the changes in the curriculum from the period before independence until today, as well as the catalysts and contexts that brought about these changes.

The term “curriculum” has been used differently by various authors and researchers in education. For some, curriculum is a plan for teaching and learning. For example, Gagne (1967) defines curriculum as a sequence of content units. To the Indiana Department of Education (2010), curriculum means the planned interaction of stu-
724 Change in Primary School Curriculum

Many primary schools, especially rural schools, have reduced the amount of time allocated to each subject and increased the emphasis on practical and applied skills. This change has been influenced by the National Curriculum Standards, which emphasize a balance between theoretical and practical knowledge.

725 Curriculum Changes in Primary Education

The introduction of the National Curriculum has led to a number of changes in primary education. These changes include a greater emphasis on practical skills, a reduction in the number of subjects taught, and the introduction of new subjects.

726 New Curriculum Standards

The National Curriculum Standards have been developed to ensure that students are well-prepared for the transition to secondary education. The standards aim to ensure that students have a broad and balanced education, with a focus on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
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7.3 Curriculum Changes in Malaysian Education from 1957 to 1979

At the point of independence in 1957, the system of education the country inherited was fragmented and lacked overall cohesion. Without a unified curriculum, and with curriculum support materials mostly from overseas, the task of introducing local content in a curriculum that was appropriate to local conditions and society took centre stage. Over time, changes were introduced regarding the medium of instruction, the centralization of curriculum development and the public examination system.

7.3.1 Changes in Primary School Curriculum After Independence (1957–1979)

In 1960, the Rahman Talib Committee was set up to plan the implementation of the proposals of the 1956 Razak Report. It had aimed at implementing and strengthening the use of the Malay language as a medium of learning and teaching in the primary and secondary schools. As a result, the Rahman Talib report became the basis for the Education Act (Federation of Malaya 1961). Hence, the recommended curriculum in this era was focused on standardizing the medium of instruction in national schools, while Chinese and Tamil were used in their respective national-type schools. Schools were encouraged to use the Malay language to teach all subjects. The supported curriculum such as the text books that were used in the national-type primary schools were similar to those used in national primary schools, although the language used was different.

Before 1964, despite having a national education system, there was no standardized national curriculum or standardized test at the primary school level. Then, in 1964, the General Syllabuses and Review Committee was set up. It resulted in the launching of Comprehensive Education in 1965 and the beginning of the standardized central examination at the end of Standard 5 in 1967. By 1970, there was a major change in the curriculum in the form of medium of instruction in all non-vernacular primary schools. In the 1970s, in accordance to the national language policy, the government began to change English medium primary and secondary national-type schools into Malay-medium national schools. The language change was made gradually starting from the first year in primary school in 1970. The change was completed in the secondary school system by the end of 1982. The post-independence period also saw the introduction of a new school subject named Islamic Studies. This subject must be taught in all schools that have Muslim students.

Then, in 1950, again there was another move to overcome these inequalities, when the Barnes Report was produced. It had suggested that all primary vernacular schools use a single standardized curriculum but using two methods of instruction, Malay and English. The Barnes Report had proposed the conversion of all Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools into National schools.

Also, in 1952, there were two legislative reforms towards this effort of unifying the school curriculum, the Feen-Wu Reports and the Educational Ordinance. The Feen-Wu Report had proposed that Chinese vernacular schools should be maintained but supported the idea of setting up "national" schools using a single national curriculum. Based on the Barnes and Feen-Wu reports, the British also agreed that the Chinese and Tamil languages be taught as third languages, apart from English and Malay in the national schools.

To review the education system before the nation become independent, the Razak Report was produced in 1956. This Report had also proposed that the newly independent nation address the issue of setting up a single national curriculum for all schools. This Report proposed the establishment of two types of public primary schools, the National schools and National-type schools. All the schools should use the same national curriculum. The National schools were to use Malay language as the medium of instruction, while, in the National-type schools, the medium of instruction was either English, Chinese or Tamil, with the Malay language as a compulsory subject. The Report also proposed that a single public examination be administered at the primary school level. These proposals went on to play a significant role in shaping the nation's curricular structure in years to come.

7.2.2 Changes in Secondary School Curriculum Before Independence (1946–1957)

During the period before Independence in 1957, the secondary school curriculum was based on the curriculum from Great Britain. The curriculum changes that were introduced were in line with the changes in the British curriculum. During this era, the English language was used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, as suggested by the Barnes Report. Furthermore, when the Razak Report was introduced in 1956, it proposed that in the secondary schools, only one common syllabus be used in the classroom and that the Malay and English languages be made compulsory. The force of curricular change at the secondary school level was minimal before independence and it was largely driven from outside of the country (i.e., from Britain).
Changes in the Primary School Curriculum from 1990

7.4.1 Changes in the Primary School Curriculum from 1990

1999

7.3.2 After Independence (1957-1979)

7.4.2 Changes in Secondary School Curriculum

N. Mood and J.M.

In the 1990s and 1990s, the education sector was restructured, focusing on improving the quality of education. The primary curriculum was revised and new subjects were introduced, including science and technology. The secondary curriculum was also adapted to better prepare students for the challenges of the new millennium. The integration of information technology in the classroom became a priority. The government introduced educational policies aimed at improving literacy rates and providing equal opportunities for all students. The focus on vocational education was increased to meet the needs of the growing industrial sector. The curriculum was made more flexible to allow for individual student interests and abilities. The emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills was heightened to prepare students for the competitive global environment. The introduction of English as a medium of instruction in many schools was a significant step towards enhancing the quality of education. The role of the private sector in education increased, with the establishment of numerous private schools. These reforms laid the foundation for the educational system to adapt and respond to the changing needs of society and the economy.
ies curriculum proposed that teachers use teaching methods that incorporate group learning, concrete material and everyday examples in problem solving (Curriculum Development Centre, 2002, 2003).

The tested curriculum of KBSR consisted of formative assessment, progress evaluation and summative assessment (Nik Azis 1995). Formative assessment was administered after the teaching of each basic skill, and the responsibility of the teacher was to immediately conduct remedial activities to students who were found to have not acquired that basic skill. The progress evaluation was administered after the end of a lesson unit, and the responsibility of the teacher was to conduct enrichment activities to students who were found to have achieved the objective of the lesson unit. Summative assessment was administered after the teaching of several lesson units, and the responsibility of the teacher was to plan lessons for new units so that the instruction would be more effective. At the end of Year 6, students sat for a standardized national examination called the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) which was administered for the first time in 1988. Among the uses of the results of this examination was to evaluate the effectiveness of the KBSR and to determine students who are qualified to enrol at fully residential secondary schools and premier daily secondary schools.

Despite having the KBSR as a national framework for planning curricular change in primary schools in the early 1980s, this curriculum had not been effective in achieving its objectives of producing holistic students. Therefore, in 1989, the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced the National Philosophy of Education (Ministry of Education 1993; Curriculum Development Centre 1989) with the aim of producing harmonious and balanced human beings. The Ministry hoped the new National Philosophy of Education would strengthen the efforts towards national unity and the integration of the various subjects in the school curriculum in producing well-developed individuals.

To make the primary school curriculum more aligned to the National Philosophy of Education, in 1993 the New Primary School Curriculum was revised and renamed the Primary School Integrated Curriculum. This revised curriculum put greater emphasis on the integration of values in classroom teaching and learning. Teachers were encouraged to use teaching approaches that provided students with opportunities to develop universal human values.

It was also found that during the implementation of the Man and His Environment subject in the Primary School New Curriculum, teachers had failed to introduce primary school students to science effectively. Many teachers tended to focus more on the geography component of the subject. Therefore, in 1994, the Man and His Environment subject was replaced by two different subjects, Science and Local Studies. The Science subject was introduced in this curriculum in order to develop scientific process skills and scientific manipulative skills among Level Two students.

As the nation progressed along the last decade of the twentieth century, there was another change in the primary school curriculum. Malaysia began experimenting with a primary school curriculum that will prepare students to enter the secondary school where they will learn using information and communication technology. The experiment was a response to the setting up of the Multi-Media Super Corridor and

the proclamation on 28 September 1992, that Malaysia becomes a developed nation in its own mould by 2020. This call for change had followed the setting up of the Smart School Initiatives which was launched in 1995 (Shaharuddin and Abidin 2009). The planning and development of these smart schools were guided by the Smart School Education Blueprint. The Primary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSR) was reviewed and revised to accommodate the changes in teaching and learning approaches proposed by the Smart School Education Blueprint. The smart school version of the KBSR curriculum was piloted in only four smart schools beginning in 1999. This version of the curriculum was never implemented in other schools once the pilot was over in 2003.

The years from 1980 to 1999 saw major changes to the primary school curriculum. These changes came about as Malaysia prepared to become a modern industrial nation. These changes were made to ensure that future workers are skilled and competent especially in science and technology.

7.4.2 Changes in the Secondary School Curriculum from 1980 to 1999

As a continuation to the changes introduced in the Primary School Integrated Curriculum which completed its cycle in 1988, the KBSSM (Secondary School Integrated Curriculum) was launched for all subjects in all Form One classrooms in 1989 (Curriculum Development Centre 1989). Apart from continuing the changes made in the Primary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSR), the Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSSM) was designed to reflect the National Philosophy of Education (Curriculum Development Centre 1989) with the aims of producing harmonious and balanced human beings. To achieve this aim, the KBSSM was designed to go beyond academic achievement. It hoped to expand the scope of the curriculum to include the human development and awareness of the bases of knowledge. The goal was to overcome the shortcomings of the old secondary school curriculum that overemphasized the importance of examinations, neglected the importance of development of character, as well as the lack of emphasis on spiritual development that contributed to the decline in students' discipline (Nik Azis 1995).

In order to overcome these shortcomings, the design of the KBSSM curriculum was guided by several principles such as continuation from the development conducted at the primary school level; general education for all students; lifelong learning; integration in the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical development of students; using the currently available knowledge discipline and the use of Malay language as the medium of instruction (Nik Azis 1995). The KBSSM curriculum was implemented in stages beginning in Form One classrooms in 1989. However, for the language subjects, the curriculum was launched 1 year earlier which was in 1988. In order to provide general education to Malaysian secondary school students, the KBSSM curriculum made all subjects compulsory.
The education program was expanded and improved to accommodate the increasing number of students. The curriculum was restructured to focus on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The emphasis was placed on providing students with a well-rounded education that prepares them for future academic and career opportunities. The curriculum was designed to foster a love for learning and encourage students to pursue their interests. The new curriculum included a variety of subjects, such as science, math, English, social studies, and the arts. The program was also designed to be inclusive, with accommodations for students with special needs. The overall goal was to provide a high-quality education that prepares students for success in college and beyond.
and English language. A revised Malay language curriculum and English language curriculum were introduced to improve the teaching of both subjects. The teaching of science and mathematics in Malay language was implemented beginning in Year 1, while students in the other primary year levels who had begun to do mathematics and science in English under the PPSMi policy would continue in English. Using the so-called soft landing approach, pupils who have learnt mathematics and science before 2010 would continue to do so until they completed their secondary education. The teaching of science and mathematics using the Malay language was re-implemented fully in national schools by 2016.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) to replace the Integrated Primary Schools Curriculum (KBRS). One of the key driving forces behind the introduction of the KSSR curriculum was the poor international assessment results, in particular the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). As the nation developed, the goal of this new curriculum was to provide students with the relevant knowledge, skills and values to face the challenges of the twenty-first century (MOE 2010). The KSSR implementation started incrementally with Year 1 in 2011; and by 2016 all 6 years of primary education followed the new curriculum. The curriculum document for all the subjects at the primary level is known as the Standard Curriculum Document and Assessment (DSKP) and was an attempt at integrating instructional and assessment standards.

The formulation of KSSR was based on statements of standards. Each statement of standards consists of content standards and learning standards that students need to achieve in a specific period and level of schooling. The Content Standards – covering knowledge, skills and values – spell out what students are required to know and be able to do within a specific year of schooling. Learning Standards refers to the indicators of the education achievement that can be measured for each content standard (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2012).

The KSSR curriculum is divided into two levels: Level 1 (Year 1-3) and Level 2 (Year 4-6). In Level 1, the emphasis is on the mastery of the basic 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), basic ICT, reasoning skills, the development of socio-emotional, spiritual, physical and cognitive competencies (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2010). The knowledge section is divided into three main modules: the core basic module, the core thematic module and the elective module. The focus of the core basic module includes literacy and numeracy and spiritual and development through subjects such as Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language), English, Chinese or Tamil (only for national-type schools), mathematics, Islamic education (for Muslim pupils) or Moral education (for non-Muslim pupils) and physical education. The Thematic Core Module consists of three subjects, namely “Arts and Me”, “World of Science and Technology” and “Malaysia Negaraku” (Malaysia My Country). The Elective Module contains language subjects such as Chinese, Tamil, Arabic, Iban, Kadazandusun or Semai, which schools could offer based on pupils’ request.

At Phase II in the primary level, the curriculum emphasizes strengthening and applying the 4Rs including reasoning, basic ICT skills, the development of socio-emotional, spiritual, physical and cognitive. Content knowledge is available through all the subjects. Core subjects such as Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese and Tamil (for vernacular schools), mathematics, science, Islamic education, Moral education, physical education and health education are retained. One of the key differences between the KSSR and KBRS curriculum is the focus on the 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Reasoning) in KSSR, compared to the 3Rs (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) in KBRS. In KSSR the focus is on six pillars such as communication, spiritual attitude and values, humanities, literacy in science and technology, physical and aesthetic development and personal development, while in KBRS the focus was on the three areas – communication, man and his environment and self-development of the individual. The curriculum was framed based on the learning outcomes in KBRS, while in KSSR, it was based on content and learning standards. In the KSSR document, the final examination grade would be the score in the national examination at Year 6 (UPSR) and school-based assessment.

The table below compares the differences between the KBRS and KSSR curriculum.

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7.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The challenges in the secondary school curriculum

In 2000, the Michigan Educational School Curriculum (K-12) was revised to meet the new millennium.

The curriculum was revised for all science and mathematics subjects. The PSAM curriculum was revised for physics, mathematics, and science. The revised curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics. The revised curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics.

In 2002, the new curriculum was implemented for all subjects and grades. The new curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics. The revised curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics.

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In 2018, the revised curriculum was implemented for all subjects and grades. The new curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics. The revised curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics.

In 2020, the revised curriculum was implemented for all subjects and grades. The new curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics. The revised curriculum was designed to improve the teaching and learning of science and mathematics.
economic advancement. That was the catalyst for the revision of the KBSR and KBSM curriculum for all subjects in schools in 2001.

Another curriculum change that resulted in implementation hiccups when implemented was the change on the medium of instruction for the science and mathematics curriculum from Malay to English language. Even though the curriculum change in science and mathematics through the PPSMI policy was well intended, it was a failure due to the hasty implementation similar to the KBSR implementation failure (Azziah 1987). The key challenge of the mastery of the English language among both teachers and students was not taken into account when implementing PPSMI (Hwa 2011). Likewise, the short timeframe for teacher preparation contributed to teacher resistance to change in many schools.

Malaysia’s poor performance in the international assessments was also one of the drivers to revise the curriculum towards the standards-based curriculum. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012, Malaysian students’ performance was below the international average in mathematics, science and reading. However, the KSSR curriculum implementation, done cohort by cohort beginning in year 2011 with teachers in Year 1, encountered many of the problems encountered in the implementation of the KBSR in the early 1960s in terms of dissemination of information and teacher preparation. Furthermore, the introduction of the assessment standards called performance standards in the curriculum was also done hastily and only introduced in the Year 4 curriculum beginning in 2014, midway during the implementation of the KSSR.

Implementation issues continue to be a major challenge. In a study conducted by a research team from the University of Malaya investigating teachers’ practices in Form One classrooms (Tee et al. 2016), it was found that when it came to the curriculum implementation practices, a large majority (89.3%) of teachers offloaded the curriculum by relying significantly or entirely on existing curriculum materials. About 10% had adapted from the existing curriculum by adding their own design elements. While, only a small fraction of teacher (0.7%) had innovated in their implementation of the curriculum by using the existing curriculum as a “seed” but eventually implemented the curriculum in novel ways. The same study also found that almost all teachers had not made much connections of topics within the subject they are teaching, between the subject they are teaching and other subjects and to the real-world despite emphasis of these in the present KBSM curriculum. They had not made any attempts to help students explore intra- and inter-disciplinary relationships with the curriculum being implemented. Most teachers did not attempt to connect lessons to real-world experiences and situations.

Through the years, the curriculum landscape in Malaysia has seen many changes. However, particularly in the last decade or so, much of the changes and progress have been impeded by implementation issues as well as overall lack of coherence and continuity. These challenges must be addressed more comprehensively to pave the way towards a better education system for the country.

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References


1 Background on Language Education Policies

Background on Language Education Policies

South China University of Technology

The Chinese government has been意识到 the importance of language education in promoting cultural diversity and national unity. The government has implemented various policies and programs to improve language education, including Mandarin promotion, ethnic language protection, and bilingual education.

2 The Role of Indigenous Languages in Schools

The Role of Indigenous Languages in Schools

In many ethnic minority areas, indigenous languages are still widely used in daily life and cultural activities. However, the use of indigenous languages in schools is limited, and there is a need to develop effective language education policies to promote the use of these languages in education.

Chapter 8

The Case of Sarawak

In Sarawak, an autonomous state in Malaysia, there are several ethnic groups, each with their own languages. The government has taken steps to promote the use of indigenous languages in education, including providing resources and support for language education programs.

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