

## Education Perspective in Addressing Multi Religion, Ethnic and Cross Culture in Malaysian Nation Building

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to discuss historically from the Islamic education perspective in dealing with the issue of multi religion and cross culture in context of Malaysian nation building. Education has regarded a stronger feature and plays significant roles especially in addressing important issues in a nation such as values of races, religious beliefs and diversity of culture. Thus, philosophy of education is the foundation of all educational aims, theories and practices of a nation. Nowadays, the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) is regarded as as the clear basis for all types and levels of education in Malaysia which requires that it should be put into practice by all concerns, especially, educators. The NPE has clearly stated that individuals of the Malaysian nation should have the following main characteristics, i.e. balance and harmony in the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical aspects; belief in and devotion to God; knowledge; competence; honour; responsibility; capability to achieve a high level of personal being and be prepared to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the society and the nation at large. These principles generally are in line and do not contradict with Islamic education and the concept of nation building in Islam which is based on the concept of ummah and Tawhid. From the Islamic education perspective, the statement of 'belief in and devotion to God' in the NPE should cause the Muslim citizens uphold Tawhid as their basis of life and activities which will eliminate other interests that may influence their actions. In other words, the statement of 'belief in and devotion to God' means that religion and religious values are a serious concern of the Malaysian educational system especially among the Muslims. The NPE has respected and considered the existence of other religions in Malaysia as well as addressing issues related with multi religion, ethnic and cross culture in the Malaysia community. This religious community should strongly uphold spiritual, moral and ethical values, since religion is the ultimate concern of human beings if the nation is to have a balanced and comprehensive development Malaysian citizens.*

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-racial developing country in the South-east Asian region with the Malays, Chinese and Indians as the three main races. Based official national statistics, the 2016 population of Malaysia was estimated at around 31.7 million and this is an increase of 0.5 million persons as compared to 31.2 million persons in 2015. Among Malaysian citizens, ethnic Bumiputera recorded the highest percentage with 68.6%, followed by Chinese 23.4% of Malaysian population. The Indian ethnic is 7.0% of the population and the others is 1%. Malaysia is aiming to be a fully developed nation by 2020 and the government has determined several broad objectives, strategies and targets to guide the nation's development. This

given the clear picture that, according to Hazri and Santhiram (2012), as an ethnically pluralist society, one of the major ongoing tasks, as well as an important tasks, of the Malaysian government has been to develop a nation which is harmonious, integrated, and democratic and which shares a national identity and values as a Malaysian nation. On the other hands, as other nations, the government gives high priority to education since educational and training systems will continue to be geared towards moulding individuals to become better Malaysians, with the right attitude towards life and work, and to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to make Malaysia a developed nation. According to Mohd Ridhuan Tee, Ong Hai Liaw and Norhasinah (2012) the commitment and

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compromise by the Malaysian government towards national education system is high especially when the government promotes the concept 1 Malaysia in order to build a strong identity among the nation. In his observation on Malaysian education system, Fakhri R. Khader (2012), Chairman of Department of Educational Science Petra University Amman Jordan rightly concludes that the desire of the Malaysian government to ensure that education plays an important role of unifying and integrating the multiethnic population remains important in policy processes in education. Not only that,, such policies have been to some extent successful in eliminating ethnic differentials. Therefore, if education policy is not sensitive to the issue of social cohesion and does not incorporate the perspectives of key stakeholders, it can be divisive and alienating, contributing to injustice and violence. It seems clear that education has become a stronger feature of nation building in general, and Malaysian development in particular. Thus, education plays significant roles especially in addressing important issues such as values of ethnic, religious beliefs and diversity of culture and multi religion and ethnic. This makes the clear statement that an ethnic considerations as well as religion and culture, remain central in the production and implementation of education policy in Malaysia. In the context of Islamic teaching, this should be taken into account in order to understand the nature and values of a community as well as to ensure the effectiveness of preaching Islam to them.

### EDUCATION AND NATION BUILDING

This paper will look at the establishment of the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) in Malaysia which is the foundation of education system in Malaysia. After that, nation building in the light of othe NPE will be examined as will be the Islamic concept of nation building. Briefly, the word 'philosophy' derived from the Acient Greek noun *philosophia* which literally means 'love of wisdom'. Therefore, it means that a philosopher is a lover of wisdom. Philosophy of education is not synonymous with educational theory, is not a study of the history of educational thought nor is it a matter of drawing conclusions, making extrapolations, and eliciting implications from bodies of systematic or doctrinaire thought of metaphysical, social-

political or religious nature (Cornel, 1989). Philosophy of education, in the most general sense is the application of philosophy and the method of philosophy to educational problems. The phrase 'philosophy of education' may also be understood as those problems of philosophy that are of direct relevance to educational theory (O'Connor, 1980).

In fact, Peters (1966) earlier before that has explained in his book, *Ethics and Education*, the main issues with which the philosophy of education is concerned. These are:

- the analysis of concepts specific to education, for example: 'education', 'teaching', 'training', and 'school',
- the application of ethics and social philosophy to education,
- the assumption about transmission, which is not only low-level empirical questions about learning and motivation but also is concerned with fundamental problems in philosophical psychology.
- the connection of all sorts of philosophical problems with the curriculum.

Philosophy of education emphasises the idea of national purpose as Abdul Halim (1994, 133-13), states that:

'...philosophy of education is the thinking of a nation which has been inculcated in every educational aspect including the system, methodology etc. This means, the philosophy of education has a vital role, and it determines education of the nation since it becomes the ground for every educational aspect.'

From the above standpoint, conceptual analysis and the examination of educational theories are the essential concerns of the philosophy of education. Philosophical analysis in education should not be carried on for just its own sake, but primarily in order to clear the ground in order to make a wide variety of practical decisions about the conduct of education. Philosophy of education as a form of national thinking, that is concerned with critical examination of the concepts and theories relevant to education, and determines the goals of education itself. In other words, it is the

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foundation of the educational aims, theories and practices of a nation.

### THE NATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND MALAYSIAN NATION BUILDING

Historically, after independence, Malaysia gradually formulated and implemented a national education system which was primarily based on the Razak Reports (1956), the Rahman Talib Reports (1960) and the Educational Act (1961). These reports formed the basis or framework for the determination of educational policies in Malaysia. Its primary aim was to build a united nation through a uniform and nationally oriented curriculum, Bahasa Melayu becoming the national language, as well as the schools' main medium of instruction (Ministry of Education, 1992; Awang Had, 1994).

The long process of uniting the different races in Malaysia after independence, which had already been initiated, unfortunately was jeopardised by the events of 13 May 1969. This was a crisis between the two largest ethnic groups in Malaysia: namely, the Malays and Chinese. These two ethnic groups fought against each other, and making this the darkest period in Malaysian history (Hussin Mutalib, 1990). This led the government to attempt to reunite and reconcile the Malay and non-Malay people of Malaysia by the introduction of Rukunegara in 1970 (Murugesu Pathmanathan, 1991). The Rukunegara is guided by the following principles i.e.: Belief in God, Loyalty to King and Country, Upholding the Constitution, Rule of Law and, Good Behaviour and Morality. Subsequently, a Cabinet Committee (1974) reviewed the implementation of the national educational policy. These reports were ready in 1979 and made many important recommendations, concluded with an emphasis on the significance of the educational process in producing a balanced human being.

It also is worth noting that in the 1970s, Islamic revivalism also emerged and led to a rise of Islamic consciousness among the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia. Many *da'wah* movements became active such as ABIM, *Dar al-Arqam*, *Jama'at Tabligh*, PERKIM, and several Muslim youth groups also emerged in the universities, significantly contributing to the development of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia and pressuring the government to adopt more

Islamic elements in its policies (Hussin Mutalib, 1990b). The most significant area in which Islamic revivalism had a great impact was in education. According to Mohd Kamal Hassan (1992:45):

As more and more Muslims became aware of the defects of an educational system based on secular western prototype, the demand in the light of Islamic educational philosophy and values increased. The need to integrate moral spiritual and metaphysical values in school and university curricula was reiterated by several Muslim intellectuals and scholars over the years but response from the policy makers has not been very encouraging.

In fact, up to that time, there was no written statement of a National Philosophy of Education as a clear basis for educational plans and practices, nor was the theological dimension clearly mentioned in the current educational system. Hassan Langgulung (1993: 24) for example, identified the weakness of the secondary education curriculum:

The former curriculum of secondary schools were found not to be values and skills which could enable students to be citizens who possess patriotism and moral values. Among the characteristics of the former curriculum were over factual knowledge and preparing students for tertiary education. These were the reasons for the lack of emphasis on the development of character and personality in the previous curriculum.

In spite of the economic development and progress of Malaysia, there were seen to be problems in Malaysian society such as the spiritual vacuum and discord between material and spiritual values. Robiah Sidin (1987: 88) wrote:

Today, as Malaysia marches forwards to uplift the economic and social well-being of its people, and as industrialisation and urbanisation widen its impact, an awareness that there is a kind of a spiritual vacuum among its populace has surfaced. There is a realisation that there is a kind of discord between material progress and

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economic development and spiritual and moral progress.

Therefore, a careful educational planning was started in 1982 which involved various groups within and outside the Ministry of Education to work out a national philosophy of education. As a result, in 1987, the Ministry of Education formulated the NPE based on the Razak Reports, Rahman Talib Reports, Educational Act 1961, the Cabinet Committee Reports, and the Rukunegara (Mook Son Sang, 1992). The reformation of education, and the establishment of NPE in particular, is a continuity from previous educational reports and also a strengthening of current policy. Malaysia needs a futuristic education system geared towards a young generation which is able to deal with current and future challenges.

The National Philosophy of Education (NPE), therefore, is stated as follows:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort toward further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well being able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation at large.

Consequently, the legislation for the New Curriculum of Secondary Schools - KBSM in 1989) and the New Curriculum of Primary Schools - KBSR in 1995 reflected the NPE's definition, ideals, and aspiration of education. Thus, the formulation of NPE, which is the basis of the educational policy, strategy and practice as discussed earlier, can be seen as an attempt to produce knowledgeable, well behaved, balanced and harmonious human beings. The formulation of the educational philosophy is closely related to the goals of the nation and the basis in addressing various issues related with multi religion, ethnic and cross culture in the Malaysia community. According to Wan Zahid Noordin

(1993), the statement of NPE is to prevent alien and negative elements, which are not applicable to the nature of Malaysia, from influencing educational thought and implementation. Moreover, he argued that the reformation of the Malaysian education system was aimed towards the improvement and rectification of the education system, a reformation which is concerned with understanding a world-view and a paradigm of knowledge that should be observed.

The statement of NPE obviously showed that religious and moral education have been considered more seriously than they were previously. The implementation of the national curriculum in schools, can therefore, be seen as a practical effort to fulfil the nation's building. Education, therefore plays the role of preparing or nurturing individuals to live in society and thus being able to perform specific functions in society.

### **NATION BUILDING: ISLAMIC EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE**

The Muslim world is generally separated into nation-states, and Muslims hold citizenship of those states, in many of which nationalism has emerged. Nationalism has as a result become a deep-rooted part of the political thinking of many Muslims. In Islam, however, the traditional concept of nation building is universal and not restricted to any nation or country or geographical location. One cannot discuss the Islamic concept of nation building without referring to the Islamic concept of ummah. The term ummah is clearly enunciated in the al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah, appearing sixty-four times in sixty-two verses (Darrow, 1987) At the present time, the term ummah, refers almost exclusively to Muslims as defined by Hassan Langgulung (1989: 128):

...a universal society of ethnicities or communities, but whose commitment to Islam binds them to a specific social order. Its territory is not only the whole earth but all of creation. It is transracial and regards all humanity as its actual or potential members.

The concept of ummah, therefore, can be understood as a universal force and foundation of Muslim society, which gives a sense of belonging to its members based on their

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common or shared belief in Islam, and not on their status or on the blood ties. Generally, in discussing the essence of Islamic civilisation, al-Faruqi states that the concept of Tawhid gives the concept of ummah its dimensions in terms of methodology and content (al-Faruqi, 1992). From the above account, we may conclude that the universal concept of ummah becomes the foundation of Islamic 'nation building', which is grounded on the concept of Tawhid. Therefore, this shows that the underlying ideals of ummah should be considered in the process of nation building of the present Muslim nations.

Nation building, in general, is a difficult task and has varied implications which are influenced by certain conditions such as the politics, the economy, the culture and religion of the country and also the outside factors. Thus, the task of nation building has a considerable influence on the education system of most new countries and the goal of nation building finds explicit statement in official documents on education policies and Malaysia is no exception. Malaysian nation building is not only a political task, but it presents also a very challenging intellectual question in the reconciliation of a conceptual-ideological conflict, arising from the confrontation of nationalism and Islam. Therefore, it is very difficult to give a precise definition of the concept of the Malaysian nation, in a heterogeneous country, which can be universally agreed.

The agenda of nation building should, therefore, involve the development of individuals, who have self-confidence and strong minds which are nourished by theological values - those values, in the context of Malaysia as a multi-faith country, are for example; universal moral values, self-assurance, commitment to honesty and justice, and tolerance. This religious community should strongly uphold spiritual, moral and ethical values, since religion is the ultimate concern of human beings if the nation is to have a balanced and comprehensive development, i.e. both material and spiritual, especially if seen from the Islamic perspective.

Since it is clearly indicated in the NPE, education in Malaysia has a significant role in nation building, particularly for the building of the younger generation. The schools are expected to create a type of pupil who is knowledgeable and ethical, and who contributes to the progress,

development and prosperity of the nation. Therefore, the reform of education should be implemented so that the building of the next generation will not be neglected. Moreover, according to Abu Bakar Nordin (1993), education should be concerned to produce the literate citizens of the future. He said that this requires a basis of students with a desire for self improvement and the skills needed to carry it out and it certainly needs religion as its basis. Nevertheless, it should be recognised that the many outside factors such as family institutions, social structures and political stability significantly contribute to nation building, although education is generally taken to be the main factor.

The NPE has stated that individuals of the Malaysian nation should have the following main characteristics, i.e. balance and harmony in the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical aspects; belief in and devotion to God; knowledge; competence; honour; responsibility; capability to achieve a high level of personal being and be prepared to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the society and the nation at large.

Therefore, the statement of NPE helps people, especially the educators, to understand the concept of Malaysian nation building and it also gives a clear guidance for the design and implementation of educational programmes, especially in the formal educational institutions. The above discussion has attempted to show the equivalence in the NEP of individual values and the national values of the Malaysian nation. However, the crucial task is to establish the NPE as the clear basis for all types and levels of education in Malaysia which requires that it should be put into practice by all concerns, especially, educators.

In Malaysia, the statement of 'belief in and devotion to God' in the NPE should cause the Muslim citizens to consider themselves as part of the universal Muslim ummah although they are in different countries. They should uphold tawhid as their basis of life and activities, which will eliminate other outside or worldly interests that may influence their actions. Thus, it is clear in the NPE that the basis of the development of an Islamic ummah is indicated in the statement of 'belief in and devotion to God'. Thus, for

Muslims, it refers to the concept of tawhid. Although there is no statement of the Name of Allah swt.. in the NPE, for Muslims, the word 'God' ultimately belongs, and only refers to Allah swt..Rosnani Hashim (1996:36-37), addressing the question of using of the term Allah in the NPE, states:

The target group of the National Education Philosophy is wider going beyond the Muslim populace, the phrase 'belief in Allah' is not meaningful to non-Muslim and Islam does not compel others to itself.

Furthermore, she has also added that 'it is not proper that the role of vicegerency be borne by non-believers'. Thus, the word of Allah or other 'Islamic terms' only appear in the philosophies of Islamic education in Malaysia as were previously stated. The formulation of NPE has considered the multi racial population of Malaysia, including the existence and the rights of other religions and their beliefs. According to the Syed Ali Ashraf (1995), Islam shares four fundamental beliefs with other world religions inspite of basic doctrinal differences. It is necessary to have some common understanding of good deeds and guiding values which will encourage the adherents of different religions to accept and uphold the same noble values. In Malaysia, all religions have agreed with the inculcation of the sixteen universal sacred values in the national educational system(Ministry of Education,1992).

Secondly, the principal of the Islamic ummah which is based on the concept of tawhid emphasises the relation of the individual to Allah swt. In the NPE, it is clearly stated that the creation of individuals should be 'based on a firm belief in and devotion to God' which gives us an understanding that there is a firm relation between the individual and God.Thus, the NPE statement of 'belief in and devotion to God' means that religion and religious values are a serious concern of the Malaysian educational system and in the 'process of the development of the individual, since religion gives meaning and guidance in life and religion should not be considered as a primitive life, but it becomes the structure of life (Rosnani Hashim, 1996). Therefore, in a religiously based society such as Malaysia, the so-called spiritual content of any

religion has been given special consideration in the process of human development.

The NPE has stated that the individual should be intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious. Islamic education plays a crucial role in the realisation of NPE especially for the development of Muslim students. In accordance with the aim of NPE to produce balanced human beings, the PIE has interpreted the term 'balanced' in NPE with the statement of 'to ensure the happiness in this world and the Hereafter'. In this matter, Wan Zahid Noordin (1993) argued that, the existence of Islamic education elements in the NPE, however, should not be understood as an actual Islamization of knowledge, but the elements of Islamic Education will only appear if the righteous values and Islamic and Moral Education are seriously considered.

Thus, for the Muslims, Islamic Education plays an important role in the Malaysian educational system today although in the present reality, the dualism of knowledge still exists. However, the implementation of the concept of integrated education today is expected to gradually remove the influences of dualism and secularism in the national education system, which have been inherited from the past colonial period.

Finally, from a general point of view, the characteristics of Malaysian citizens which have been proclaimed in the NPE, such as belief and devotion to God, knowledgeability, responsibility, the possession of high moral standard, competence and contribution to the betterment of the community and country, have clearly been formulated from an Islamic perspective. In the previous discussion of the Islamic concept of individual development we can clearly observe that Islam emphasises the importance of a balanced and integrated development of human beings.

### CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the statement 'belief in and devotion to God' in the NPE, therefore, obviously determines the aim and implementation of the education system and the concept of nation building in Malaysia based on God and religious values. The philosophy of education is a critical examination of educational concepts and theories which become the foundation of the

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whole educational system, as seen in the Malaysia educational system. Basically, the formulation of the NPE in 1987 is closely associated with educational reform in Malaysia and with national goals. It has been translated into practices by the designation and legislation of KBSR and KBSM. Never before have the Malaysians had as clear a statement of a philosophy of education as they have today. Thus, the NPE gives clear guide lines for educators to design or to execute any educational theories and practices. In Islam, nation building is based on the concepts of ummah and tawhid; and that bring about the 'universal concept of nation building'. The concept of ummah is founded on the concept of brotherhood and equality. The concept of ummah should become the foundation of Islamic 'nation' building.

In the context of Malaysia, nation building has been more considered by the government after the damaging events of 13rd May 1967, which were later followed by the formulation on the National Ideology that guides the nation building. Education has played an important role in achieving the national aim. In general, the process of nation building has encouraged and nourished the Malaysian consciousness, although there are still some racial discord problems. Today, the building of younger generation in Malaysia, which is a multi-faith country, is more concerned with religious and theological values.

In the education system, the NPE has clearly denoted the creation of individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, and who believe and devote to God. They should also possess these characteristics i.e. knowledgeability, competence, honourable behaviour, responsibility, and contribute to the community, religion, nation and country. The NPE emphasises the significance of the relations between human beings and God. Thus, religious beliefs and values have been seriously considered in the present educational system and in respect to the individuals' development. Another important point that should be noted here is that the formulation of NPE has respected and considered the existence of other religions in Malaysia as well as addressing issues related with multi religion, ethnic and cross culture in the Malaysia community. The NPE has proclaimed, therefore, the position and the significance of religion, as

such in the present Malaysian education system as well as in the nation building. The statement of 'belief in and devotion to God' in the NPE means that religion and religious values are a serious concern of the Malaysian educational system especially among the Muslims.

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**Citation:** Zulkefli bin Aini, Ab and Halim bin Tamuri. "Education Perspective in Addressing Multi Religion, Ethnic and Cross Culture in Malaysian Nation Building" *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, vol 4, no. 11, 2017, pp. 1-8

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