

Book Review

The Majority-Minority Nexus: Education of Ethnic Minorities in Plural Societies, by Tan Yao Sua & R. Santhiram. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2015, ix, 109pp.

Educating ethnic minorities in plural societies is fraught with complexities as ethnic minorities clash with majority groups who typically set educational, and thus language policies. Such a situation places the development of education for ethnic minorities into a predicament.

By exploring a number of different aspects of the needs and challenges of educating ethnic minorities in plural societies, this book uncovers both the difficulties and potential solutions for educating ethnic minorities in a plural society. A plural society refers to a unit of disparate parts that mixes but does not combine with each group, thus holding to its religion, culture and language as well as its ideas and ways (Furnivall, 1956).

The text argues strongly that the education of ethnic minorities in plural societies is inextricably intertwined with the majority-minority relations present in a given country. However, the minority groups should avoid over-zealousness in pursuing an education in their mother tongues as this may affect their social and career mobility within the mainstream as well as their role in the process of nation-building.

Various aspects are covered in the six core chapters of the book which include an investigation of the characteristics of ethnic minority groups, noting that different minorities have varying degrees of power and leverage towards majority groups regarding the maintenance of their cultures, languages and education in their ethnic languages. Furthermore, the vitality of the minority groups ethnic languages is discussed, providing information on how and why certain minority languages are maintained in the face of the majority language of a given country. An example of this would be the use of Mandarin in Malaysia, where Mandarin is used extensively by the Chinese community who are major players in the commercial sector, even where Mandarin may not be the original Chinese dialect of the speakers. Over more recent years, due to the rising power of China, the use of Mandarin has started to increase more in Malaysia and has been adopted for use even by the majority Malay population. The symbiosis between the culture and the mother tongue of ethnic minorities is also examined. Understanding how these two elements affect the continuance or an ethnic lifestyle is vital. This naturally leads to calls by ethnic groups for the use of their mother tongue in the education of their youth. The use of ethnic languages in education and the effect of cultural pluralism is covered. There is a struggle between the aims of nation-building, a common language policy, the maintenance of

cultural diversity and the demands of ethnic groups. The management of this struggle, together with the aims of the government in power and the relative power of the minority groups is vital. The experience of Switzerland was highlighted as an exception where cultural pluralism has been adopted as a major part of its nation-building process, and it shows that when cultural pluralism is accepted by all parties, then there is no longer a majority-minority society, but simply a culturally differentiated society.

The narrative continues to explain the issues regarding a nation having a common language policy whilst embracing (or not) cultural pluralism. It is noted that the use of a common language, either an indigenous language that is widely used in a nation or an internationally accepted business language offers advantages to the population, however, at the same time, this process has drawbacks for the local ethnic groups and cultures that are present in the nation. Examples are provided of the different approaches to the introduction of a common national language, together with a discussion regarding the pros and cons of such actions. Finally, the concept of bilingual education, where education is provided in both the mother tongue of an ethnic group, as well as the common language of the nation, is investigated and discussed in some detail. There are several approaches to providing bilingual education.

And to some extent, the boundaries between the approaches are somewhat blurred. Education can commence in both languages or can start in the minority language and then continue the common language at some later date. It was noted that some scholars had noted 'overload' for students who were taught in a bilingual format before they had matured the use of their mother tongue. Others had noted that students who had not commence study in the common language early enough were somewhat disadvantaged from the majority of students. In summary, it was noted that the best approach appears to be initial teaching the minority language, followed by immersion in the common language during continuing study. This system allows young students to 'learn how to learn' in their mother tongue but then extends the ability to learn in the common language of the nation. The authors commented that to enable bilingual education to be effective, sufficient teacher training and direction from the education authorities is necessary. The text posits that a bilingual approach is a viable option for the education of ethnic minorities in a plural society

The book concludes by examining the case of Malaysia, where the majority Malay population has accepted the provision of ethnic minority schooling for the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. This has been done with financial support from the central government, in the form of salaries for teachers and operating expenses for the period of primary education, it should be noted that the ethnic communities have provided the basic schooling infrastructure, such as land and buildings. For secondary education, the central government does not promote schooling in ethnic

minority languages and does not provide funding, in a bid to ensure that schooling is carried out using the national curriculum and employing the national language, namely; Bahasa Melayu. Thus, while education for ethnic minority students in the mother tongues is widely accessible at the primary level. secondary level education in ethnic minority mother tongues is severely limited to only around 50 schools in the nation.

The authors conclude the experience of Malaysia, a culturally diverse nation, can act as a good example for other nations in the education of their minorities. Malaysia has accepted the demands of the ethnic Chinese and Indians to allow the teaching of their languages and cultures to be to their young. This empowers and maintains the ethnic communities within the nation. However, at the same time the insistence of the use of the national language, Bahasa Melayu has successfully been implemented for the purpose of nation-building and has appeased the wishes of the majority Malay population who do not desire to see any reduction in the power of their community. This process is coined as transitional bilingual education, it is perceived, by the authors to be superior to the class transitional/assimilation and maintenance /pluralistic models despite some shortcomings. The last sentence of the book includes a poignant face “linguistic assimilation has traditionally dictated and continues to dictate, the language and educational policies of most plural societies”.

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