

Separate Streams, Unified Goals: The Role of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in Promoting National Integration in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia's education system reflects its multicultural fabric, offering vernacular schooling at the primary level through National Type Chinese Schools (NTCS) and National Type Tamil Schools (NTTS), where the medium of instruction is the students' mother tongue. This multilingual framework, while constitutionally protected under Article 152(1), continues to face scrutiny for allegedly hindering national integration. In light of this, the present study critically examines the potential of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) to foster national unity, particularly through Tamil-medium education. The study adopts the Unity Model by the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Council of Europe's Intercultural Integration Strategy as its theoretical foundation to explore how Tamil school leavers in Form 1 apply national integration values in secondary school. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire (180 students) and focus group interviews (10 teachers). The questionnaire, organized around five key values accepting, respecting, managing differences, fostering interaction, and active citizenship was distributed to students in Selangor state. Focus groups provided qualitative insights into students' lived experiences transitioning from Tamil primary schools to multilingual secondary settings, highlighting language use, integration challenges, and intercultural awareness. Pearson correlation analysis examined relationships between language proficiencies, academic achievement, demographics, and national integration attitudes. Multiple linear regression predicted integration attitudes from these variables. Exploratory Factor Analysis identified underlying dimensions of national integration among participants. The correlation analysis revealed that academic achievement ($r = .512$) is the strongest positive predictor of national integration attitudes, followed by English proficiency ($r = .425$), Malay language proficiency ($r = .387$), and family income ($r = .342$). Multiple regression analysis further affirmed academic performance ($\beta = .384$, $p < .001$) as the top predictor, explaining 41.9% of the variance in integration attitudes. Exploratory factor analysis produced a four-factor model of national integration: Cultural Engagement & Participation, Interpersonal Relations, Community Integration, and Cultural Sensitivity & Respect, cumulatively explaining 50.6% of the variance. Findings show that students demonstrate openness to interethnic interactions and shared civic values, although language remains a barrier in inclusive participation. English proficiency emerged as a key enabler of cross-cultural communication, while academic success was linked to broader multicultural engagement likely due to cognitive flexibility and wider exposure to diverse social environments. Socioeconomic status, particularly family income, also played a moderating role in integration outcomes. This study argues that when paired with inclusive curriculum strategies and intercultural pedagogy, MTB-MLE can meaningfully promote national integration from an early age. By foregrounding national integration values in textbooks and classroom interactions, Tamil-medium schools can bridge perceived divides and contribute to a more cohesive Malaysian society. The findings offer empirical support for education policy reform, challenging the assumption that vernacular schools hinder unity, and instead highlighting their potential role in realising the national goal of "unity in diversity".

Keywords: mother tongue, multilingual, education, national integration