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The Schools of Malaya

FREDERIC MASON



BACKGROUND TO
MALAYA SERIES

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A Background to Malaya Book



Published by DONALD MOORE for



EASTERN UNIVERSITIES PRESS LTD.

SINGAPORE

1959

First Published 1954
Revised Edition published 1957
by Donald Moore
Singapore

Third Edition 1959
EASTERN UNIVERSITIES PRESS LTD.
Singapore

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Printed by the
Malaya Publishing House, Ltd., Singapore

INTRODUCTION

In the three chapters which follow an account has been given of the schools of Malaya, which should help a person overseas or a layman in Malaya to understand the complex educational system. Inevitably details have had to be omitted and only brief references have been made to the history of education in Malaya, which can throw light on to the present complexities. Readers should not expect to find an account of the flesh and blood of education, illustrations and stories about Malayan pupils and teachers — for that they will have to wait for the emergence of schoolmaster novelists. What follows is a skeleton or framework into which other accounts about education in the newspapers and elsewhere can be fitted. The story covers the post-war years and needs to be constantly supplemented by reports of the latest developments.

To avoid misunderstanding reference is made in the book to both forms and standards in the schools, and readers may use the terminology with which they are familiar i.e. the old or the new.

I am indebted to the Education Departments of the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore for giving me up-to-date figures of pupils in schools.

INTRODUCTION TO THIRD EDITION

Since the last edition was published, enrolments in the schools have steadily increased and in both territories the struggle to provide education for every child continues. But there is no indication that either territory will solve its population problems which make the provision of satisfactory social services so difficult. However, so far there has been no crisis in which educational development has been drastically restricted by lack of money and the two Governments have now adopted salary scales for teachers which attempt to maintain the cost of education per head at a feasible level.

There have been no significant changes in the educational policy in Singapore described in Chapter Three p. 25. As a consequence of that policy increasing attention has been given to the Chinese-medium schools and Singapore is moving rapidly to a dual system in which the Chinese-medium and English-medium schools are given equal emphasis. In the Federation of Malaya, the recommendations in the Razak Report described in Chapter Three were embodied in legislation and a review of achievements under this policy is likely to take place after the elections in 1959. The need for educational advisory bodies referred to in the postscript on p. 39 still remains to be satisfied. The Educational Ordinance in the Federation provides for a new Advisory Council on Education but the Council has not yet had its first meeting and teachers' organisations in Malaya and Singapore are not yet sufficiently strong and united to provide advice to which the Governments must pay heed.

Reference is made in Chapter Three, p. 24, to four periods in the development of education in Malaya. The pattern of education in Singapore and Malaya is still that of the third stage, but with the achievement of independence in Malaya in 1957 and self-government in Singapore in 1959, it is possible that in the next two years there will be a rapid transition from the third to the fourth stage.

F. M.

February, 1959.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

The wide range of schools which children in Malaya may attend is bewildering to the stranger and often forgotten by the resident. A list would include schools which were labelled English, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Religious and Arabic, and to this should be added special schools such as the Gimson Approved School in Singapore, the Gurney Advanced Approved School in Malacca, schools for the blind such as St. Nicholas, Penang, and social welfare centres where children, who do not go to school, may be given a rudimentary education. The schools may be private, in which case they are run for profit or maintained by a committee from fees and subscriptions, mission or "aided schools", supported to a greater or lesser degree by the Government, and schools which are completely controlled and maintained by Government. This complex school system may be understood if certain points are kept in mind. Schools are grouped according to the language which is used as the medium of instruction and not by nationality or race: thus English Schools use the English language, Malay schools the Malay language, Indian schools Tamil, a principal dialect of Southern India and Ceylon, and the Chinese schools Mandarin or Kuo-Yu. Sometimes a distinction is made between the English and the vernacular schools but it is apt to be confusing; strictly speaking only the Malay and Indian schools are vernacular schools, i.e. schools in which the medium of instruction is the language of the home. In the Chinese schools the majority of the children are from families which originally came from Southern China, where the Cantonese and Hokkien dialects differ considerably from Kuo-Yu (i.e. Kuo-Yu is a new language to the Chinese children) and on the other hand the English schools contain a small but steadily increasing percentage of children for whom English is the native language.

Confusion is caused frequently by the different uses of the term "Education Department". Each state and settlement in

the Federation of Malaya, the Colony of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya as a whole have Education Departments. In that all schools have to be registered, whether they are aided by Government funds or not, they come within the orbit of the Education Departments and can be said to be part of them. A second use of the term is that limiting it to the educational administration, in the same way that one refers to local education authorities or education committees in England. But the most common and confusing use of the term, that which appears in the newspapers and is used by Government, includes the administration and all the schools fully maintained and controlled by Government, e.g. a statement by the Education Department about the shortage of teachers for English schools is likely to refer only to the Government English schools and to exclude all the aided English schools, which are as much part of the system as the Government schools. It would be much better if the term "Education Department" were confined like the corresponding term "Ministry of Education" in England to the body which makes and administers the Education Policy.

English Schools

The minimum age of entry is six years and until recently the normal pattern has been to provide seven years in the primary or junior school in two primary Standards and Standards I to V, and for some children four years in the secondary school, standards VI to IX (now Forms II to V), the pupils taking in Standard IX (Form V) the School Certificate Examination organised by the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate. Recently the average age of a child entering a school has increased because there have been far more children applying than there have been places available, and the other children have been given preference: many children are now seven years of age when they begin school. The seven years of primary schooling are being reduced to six, and the children, although older when they begin school, should reach Standard V (now Primary VI in Singapore and Form I in Malaya) at the same age as the younger children in the earlier scheme. In some secondary schools post-school certificate classes have been established, where pupils can study for examinations which will secure them entry into the University of Malaya and other Universities and places of higher education.

The majority of schools have their sessions in the morning from (about) 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. but some primary school buildings are used by two schools and there are morning and afternoon

sessions. The afternoon session is from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. and it is dark and time for bed when the children get home. Any outdoor play and homework has to take place in the morning for the pupils, who may be any age from six to thirteen years. The two schools in the one building are organised as separate units, and in order to share the burden of an afternoon session, an afternoon school one year becomes a morning school the next and vice versa. The schools are open to children of all races and classes; there are no reliable figures available about the social and income status of the parents, but one can see the children of the rich arriving at the schools each morning in expensive cars, and one knows also of servants' children and squatters' children (at least in Singapore) who attend the schools. It is probable that there is a much greater percentage of children from the higher income group in the schools at present, but the number of children from the lower groups will increase steadily as the number of schools increases. Table I shows the percentage distribution of the races in English schools in 1956.

	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Europeans, Eurasians, & others
Singapore	10.3	77.0	9.2	3.7
Federation of Malaya	26.4	48.3	23.0	2.3
Kelantan	78.1	15.4	5.6	0.9
Selangor	16.5	50.6	29.6	3.9

(A comparison with the table published in the first edition of this book shows that the proportion of Malays in the English schools has increased.)

Thus if one were to go into an English school in Singapore, four out of every five pupils would be Chinese, the fifth being Indian or Malay or Eurasian. The racial composition varies from state to state in the Federation: thus in Kelantan, a former un-federated state on the East coast, in a class of forty pupils one would expect to find thirty-one Malays, six Chinese and three

Indians, whereas in Selangor, where the composition is not very different from the average for the Federation, the composition would be twenty Chinese, twelve Indians, seven Malays and one Eurasian. Similarly all races are to be found in the teaching profession. There are Eurasians, Malays, Chinese, Indians and "Europeans", who include not only people from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, but also people from France, Germany, Italy and the United States of America: the teaching service in the Malay Peninsula is truly cosmopolitan. The Chinese and Indian races provide seven or eight out of every ten teachers, and the Malays, who form about 40% of the population, provide less than one teacher out of every ten. The great majority of teachers are "normal-trained" or students in normal training. Part-time training of a few hours per week takes place over a period of three years for student teachers who have obtained a School Certificate with a credit in English Language. Because of the rapid expansion of English education many of the students have had to teach almost full-time during their period of training and it has been difficult to give them adequate supervision.

The English schools can be divided into two groups, schools which are either maintained or aided by Government, and private schools which although registered do not receive a grant. Almost all the aided schools are provided by the Churches (mission schools); the greater part of these being under the control of the Methodist Church, a branch of the American Methodist Episcopal Church, or of the Roman Catholic Church, chiefly through two French teaching orders, the Dames de la St. Maur for the girls and the Christian Brothers (founder de la Salle) for the boys. The Church of England, whose Colonial chaplains were pioneers in the development of education in Malaya, provides only a few schools mainly in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore but some Government schools owe their origin to it. The Plymouth Brethren provides a girls' school in Kuala Lumpur. Before the Japanese occupation a very great part of the education, particularly for girls, was provided by the Churches; as the enrolment has increased the percentage attending Government schools has increased, especially in Singapore, but even today the greater part of girls' education is provided by the Churches.

The curriculum of the English schools has much in common with English schools throughout the world: emphasis is placed

on the acquisition of the 3 R's in the primary school, and in the secondary school one finds English, mathematics, history, geography and probably science as the core of the curriculum. But throughout the schools great emphasis has to be placed on acquiring facility in the use of the English language. The majority of children now enrolling in the schools come from non-English speaking homes, and the major task in the first two standards of the Primary School is the acquisition of the elements of the English language. At the beginning of each school year in January, a teacher, perhaps Chinese or Indian, whose principal language is English, will be faced by forty children, the majority of whom speak either Malay, Tamil, Cantonese or Hokkien at home. The only language shared may be a few words of English or Malay, but with the aid of gestures, labels and actions the children learn to speak English. In the secondary schools the emphasis is still on language and not on literature — set books are studied but very few other books are read, i.e. for the pupils and many teachers English is a skill to be acquired, not a "humanity" to be studied. Whilst one can be critical about the standard of English attained — the methods of teaching are not the product of systematic investigation and the time spent in teaching English could probably be used much more economically — one must recognise that Malayan students who study in English-speaking countries overseas have a better command of English than many other Asian students. As schools are extended or new schools built, science laboratories are installed — they are to be found, of course, more often in boys' schools than girls'. General Science is studied for the School Certificate examination and afterwards the separate sciences, physics, chemistry and biology.

Although art and to a lesser extent handwork are taught, the treatment of the curriculum is verbal and academic, and directed towards the School Certificate; neither parents nor teachers would desire it otherwise. Teaching and other white-collar occupations have better salaries and greater security than manual occupations, and so long as the education system continues to expand rapidly, interest will be concentrated on acquiring a School Certificate. The development of secondary modern and technical schools with their emphasis on crafts, art, physical education and domestic science, or technical training, will have to wait until primary education for all, with its great demand for teachers, has been provided. That education is too verbal, that words are clichés or meaningless counters, that teaching is too much a matter of doling out sections of text-books

are universal complaints but they are ones which have particular relevance in Malaya. Because of the system of teacher training teachers are too dependent upon the text-books, and school pupils and even University students have a capacity for regurgitating lessons or lecture material, which appears to be much greater than that of European children. This may be due to the fact that initial success in Malaya depends to a great extent on passing examinations which themselves over-emphasise the manipulation of words.

The need to be successful in examinations is perhaps the cause of another fact which would strike a Western visitor to Malayan schools, i.e. the apparent lack of disciplinary troubles. Whereas a new teacher in England has to gain control over his class and the pupils will "try him out" to see what liberties they can take, the problem does not arise in English schools in Malaya. Apart from the importance of the School Certificate, a child has to pass an annual school examination; if he fails once he may be told to leave school, and if he fails the same examination in successive years he has to leave school — to be superannuated in this way is a disgrace and closes the avenue to profitable employment. However, although problems of discipline for the teacher appear to be less they still exist; the disorder in class may not be noisy but a large number of the pupils may not be attending to or interested in the lesson.

No religious instruction and little or no moral instruction is given in the Government schools: the claim, based upon English practice, is made that moral training is given through the corporate life of the schools. But in making this claim two important facts are forgotten; the first, that whilst the corporate life of Malayan schools is growing it is still very under-developed, and second, schools in England owe a great deal to the moral traditions of the wider community which stem in a large part from the Christian religion. The need to solve the problem of providing moral instruction is urgent for almost everyone agrees that the training of character is important. With the emphasis on language in the teaching of English and the factual treatment of history and geography, there is little teaching in the humanities. Moral instruction, providing it has a sound intellectual basis and is not merely a string of unrelated second-rate precepts, should be given to pupils who do not receive religious instruction. In the Federation of Malaya the 1952 Education Ordinance has made it possible to give religious instruction in National Schools and the latest recommendations (1956) provide

for more religious instruction. Government in Singapore has set up a committee (in 1956) to make recommendations for the teaching of religion or ethics in schools.

In the Church schools it is possible to provide instruction in the Christian religion to those children whose parents want it, and almost all the children, other than those of Muslim parentage, receive it. In some schools moral instruction is separated from religious instruction and is given to all the children. The nature of the religious education depends upon the providing body — there are marked differences between that provided by the Roman Catholic teaching orders and the Methodist (American) Church. The quality depends upon the interest and extent of the special training of the teachers, and, as one would expect, it varies considerably, but Malaya and Singapore are fortunate that through the Church schools large numbers of children are given moral training.

This section has so far described schools aided or maintained by the Government; a briefer mention must be made of the private schools, which are of two main types. The first serve special groups of children; there are kindergarten and primary schools run by individuals for European children, the majority of whom will go to school in Europe or America after the age of eight. Other schools are organised by the Services, e.g. the Army and the Air Force, for children of servicemen who are stationed in Malaya for about three years. These children will have come from or go back to schools in the United Kingdom, and some of the schools like Alexandra School in Singapore provide secondary education. The second group of schools are private or continuation schools which attempt to provide an English education similar in nature and quality to that in aided or maintained schools for children who have not been able to gain entrance to or have been superannuated from them. Many of them are run by the Churches as afternoon schools in buildings which in the morning are occupied by aided schools. Some of the children are over the age prescribed in Government regulations for classes in aided or maintained schools; others have attended the aided or maintained schools, have not been able to pass the examinations and have had to leave, and the rest are those who are eligible for but have not been able to secure places in the aided or maintained schools. The majority of the teachers are not as well-qualified as teachers in the aided or maintained schools although they may have had many years of good service. As a consequence the quality of work in these private schools is poor compared with that in the aided schools

but their achievement is creditable for they are filling a gap in the education service until the Government can make more adequate provision. It would be better, however, if these private and continuation schools provided a distinctive type of education and were not simply poor copies of the aided or maintained schools.

Although there is little transfer from one school system to another, mention must be made of that which takes place. A few of the brighter children of the right age are able to gain transfer to the aided or maintained schools from the private or afternoon schools. A few who wish to have higher education in English or study overseas transfer from the Chinese vernacular schools to the English secondary schools. But the biggest transfer takes place from the Malay vernacular schools. An examination is set for boys and girls in Standard IV or V of the Malay vernacular schools, and the brightest children are transferred to special classes in English schools, where they are given concentrated instruction in the English language. The aim of the special classes is to bring the achievement of the pupils in the English language to that of the rest of the pupils at the same age, and then they are transferred to Standard IV. In Singapore the special classes are open to other races as well as to the Malays.

The Malay Schools

The normal age of entry to a Malay School is six years, and it is possible for a pupil to pass successively from Standard I to Standard VII, although very few schools provide a seventh standard, and for the majority of pupils education ceases after the fourth or fifth standard. Unlike the English schools, which are found in urban areas, the Malay schools are to be found throughout the country: in the towns they may be substantial wooden buildings on concrete piles and in the rural areas they vary from buildings similar to the town schools to structures which are little more than concrete floors covered by atap roofs. Many do not have separate classrooms, and although attempts have been made to separate the classes by partitions it is possible to see and hear as many as five classes at work at the same time. With the increased enrolments all the buildings are crowded and odd corners and spaces under the buildings are having to be used as classrooms.

All the children are Malay-speaking, and apart from the few Indian or Chinese children who have been adopted into Malay

families they are of one race, if one counts the children of Indonesian parentage as Malays. There are many more boys than girls in school, but the girls are increasing their share of the education and they have invaded the boys' schools. Thus, whilst the sexes are segregated in town schools, the schools are co-educational in the rural areas. The teachers are recruited from the schools themselves; some of the pupils are given further education in Standard VII, and are then employed as probationer teachers. A proportion of these, after sitting a competitive examination, are sent for three years' full-time training either to the Sultan Idris Training College or the Malay Women's Training College; the rest seek other employment or are employed as untrained teachers (a few states like Kelantan have other forms of teacher-training). The school system is a closed one in that there is no recruitment from outside: even the Malay pupils who have been transferred to the English schools under the special place system, do not return to the Malay schools as teachers.

The curriculum, quoting an annual report of an Education Department, consists of reading, writing (in both the Arabic and Roman script) composition, arithmetic, geography, Malay history, drawing, handwork of various kinds and physical training. There is a close connection between the work done in schools and that in the training colleges at Tanjong Malim and Malacca — when new subjects or new methods, e.g. in handwork, are taught in the colleges they soon appear in the schools. The number of books in Malay for use in schools is limited, and the shortage of reading material has meant that the pupils are only kept occupied by a detailed analysis, almost sentence by sentence, of each book. The Education Department of the Federation of Malaya issues the books, which are printed in Rumi or Jawi (Roman or Arabic script), and the pupils acquire fluency in reading both scripts. There would be a saving of effort if only one script (Rumi) were learned, but the newspapers are in Jawi and the Malays state that the pupils have no difficulty in learning this script. Religious instruction is not part of the timetable but is organised and given separately by religious teachers in the afternoon, this separation and the failure to co-ordinate the different methods of teaching, and the added strain on the pupils raises problems which the authorities

find difficult to solve. Plans are now being considered to give religious instruction as part of the normal school curriculum.

There is an air of poverty about the Malay schools which reminds an observer of the provision of elementary education in the nineteenth century in England. A minimum education is provided fairly cheaply for the people of the country (the Malays) by the Government; a more comprehensive education, one providing an avenue to the professions, is provided for those who need it by the English-medium schools. Thus apart from the poor and ill-adapted buildings, the poorly paid and ill-qualified teachers, slates are still in use in some schools, and, of the few books which are available, there are not enough copies for each pupil to have one. Like the English elementary system in the twentieth century with its "scholarships" to secondary schools, a bridge from the Malay to the English schools has been established but only a small proportion of the Malay pupils cross it.

In spite of these handicaps there is an increasing liveliness in some of the schools (more particularly the girls' schools) and a greater awareness of the value of education by parents and teachers, and good work is being done.

Chinese Schools

Like the Malay schools, Chinese schools are to be found everywhere in town and country. In Singapore one can find them in imposing buildings like the Chinese High School, or climb up the stairs in a shophouse to find eighty children crowded together into two classes in one room, or wander off the main road down a laterite road into a village where the school is a rickety wooden building with an atap roof and earth floors; in the Federation of Malaya the range is as great, some being in the new villages (resettlement areas), and others in the great centres of Chinese population like Penang.

Chinese schooling covers twelve years, six years in the Primary School, three years in the Junior Middle and three years in the Senior Middle School, but few children pass beyond the Primary School, and the fraction completing education in the Senior Middle School is very small. This is shown graphically by the following table:—

Pupils by school years in aided Chinese Schools

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6
Singapore (1955)	25,761	17,013	12,404	8,894	7,312	4,871
Federation of Malaya (1956)	62,720	56,893	47,967	35,996	27,515	15,866

Year	7	8	9	10	11	12
Singapore (1955)	3,799	2,373	1,607	1,802	999	433
Federation of Malaya (1956)	7,940	7,034	4,018	1,881	1,350	682

Thus in Singapore for every ten pupils in the eleventh year in school (Senior Middle II) there are twenty-four in the eighth year (Junior Middle II) and one hundred and twenty-four in Standard III of the Primary School; for the Federation the figures are respectively ten, fifty-two and three hundred and sixty-five. (A comparison with the figures published in the first edition of this book shows, however, that many more pupils are now staying longer at school.)

All the schools have to be registered: the majority of pupils are in schools which receive a small Government grant. The rest of the income of the aided schools and all the income of the private schools are from two sources, school fees and subscriptions collected by the school committees. With the exception of a very small number provided by the Government or Churches, the schools are provided and organised by committees, which are representatives of the different Chinese communities, and the quality of a school will depend upon the wealth of the controlling committee and the efficiency of the Chairman and Secretary. The teachers' salaries are low and this, coupled with the power of the committee to appoint or dismiss the teachers, has meant that the teachers are continually changing. Some of the teachers have not even completed their secondary school course and a large number have not received a professional training as teachers.