

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LOW YAT ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS ON MALAYSIAN VERNACULAR SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Vernacular schools in Malaysia, while only operating at the primary school level, have had a turbulent existence. Recently, the constitutional legitimacy of these schools was questioned through legal suits brought about by private citizens as well as non-governmental organisations and associations. These suits illuminate the discourses that surround vernacular schools in Malaysia. A discursive space where language use is worth examining is the digital realm, where there is an extent of openness afforded to users to communicate their feelings or views. To this end, three online discussion forums from Low Yat were examined. Posts that had written comments regarding vernacular schools were included. Through qualitative content analysis, six themes were yielded. They revealed perspectives that supported the abolishment of vernacular schools; however, there were also those who presented a contrastive perspective, mainly due to the negative views held against national schools and the educational system. From these posts, stereotypes associated with particular ethnic groups became evident. There were also disagreements towards the purpose and quality of different types of schools. All these indicate how public discourse regarding vernacular schools is complex, as seen through history and compounded by individual social practices.

Keywords: Online forum, vernacular schools, vernacular language, public discourse, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country, comprising dominant groups such as the Malays, Indians, Chinese, as well as other indigenous groups found both in peninsular Malaysia and the Eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak (Koh and Harris 2020). Due to its multilingual setting, there are a variety of languages spoken, with bahasa Malaysia (henceforth Malay) as the official language for the country. Ethnologue (2024) reports 111 living languages spoken in Malaysia. Among these languages, there are those that have been accepted as a lingua franca and hold an extent of formal status among its speakers. Such languages are Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil, which are used as the medium for instruction in vernacular schools. The history of Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia spans more than a century. This year, it was reported that there are 1,301 Chinese vernacular primary schools and 530 Tamil vernacular schools (Bedi 2024).

Despite the long-established presence of vernacular schools, their legitimacy is still being contested. Encumbered by policies that privilege certain racial groups in Malaysia (Koh 2015; Chin 2022; Lee 2022a), vernacular schools have been accused of inciting racial disunity (e.g., Selvadurai et al. 2015; Yee and Jamil 2022). Over the last few years, legal suits were taken up against these schools for allegedly being unconstitutional due to their use of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction, instead of the nation's official language, Malay. These legal suits against vernacular schools constitute practices borne out of the sociopolitical structure and privileges, promulgated by discriminatory discourses that have permeated through the history of vernacular schools and education policies in Malaysia. As stated by Crump (2014), the practices of a society are a representation of the intersection of “broader social, political, and historical practices and discourses through nested relationships” with “local language practices and individual stories” (220). Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of the discursive space of vernacular schools in Malaysia, this study aims to examine public discourse on online discussion forums. In particular, content analysis will be carried out on recent threads discussing or questioning the legitimacy of vernacular schools on the popular Malaysian online discussion forum, Low Yat.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

When Malaysia was formed in 1963, the constitution saw the need to maintain vernacular languages and schools. This was to acknowledge their long-established presence in Malaysia. During pre-independence times under the British rule, vernacular schools in Malaysia were managed almost entirely by their respective ethnic communities. The colonial government did not invest heavily in education for the Chinese and Indian students, as the former was viewed as a transient population (Lee 2007; Gill 2014) and the latter was confined to live and work within their estates, or sent to work as manual labourers (Joseph 2008; Sinayah et al. 2023). The Indian vernacular school was also terminal, with no prospects for further education, nor opportunities for administrative or professional employment with the colonial government (Raman and Tan 2010; Nathan 2022). The colonial government only managed English-medium schools, attended by the middle-class and elites. They also set up Malay schools in rural areas, as a gesture of paternalistic goodwill to the Malay Muslim folks (Joseph 2008; Tan 2013).

After independence, the vernacular school systems were reconfigured. Chinese secondary schools were converted to national schools using English as a temporary medium of instruction, before slowly transitioning to Malay as the main medium. Chinese primary schools were spared, but until today, they are still considered a site of sociopolitical contestation (Joseph 2008; Wan et al. 2020). These are known as the national-type Chinese schools, or *sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina* (SJKC). National-type Tamil schools (*sekolah jenis kebangsaan Tamil*, SJKT), on the other hand, were streamlined to offer six years of primary education; nonetheless, students from a Tamil medium would need to complete a year of “remove classes” to build proficiency in Malay before embarking on their secondary-level education. These changes instigated challenges for vernacular schools, especially in retaining their language as the medium for instruction (Joseph 2008). The resistance from the ethnic groups was strong to the point that a sedition act was amended to several articles in the constitution in 1971 (Sreedharam and Ramayah 2020). This was to prohibit other ethnic groups from questioning the constitution (Sadhu Singh 2021). While this appeased the dominant fraction, it was seen as a permanent barrier that alienated other ethnic groups (Lee 2007).

Even in the past few decades, vernacular schools remain contested. There have been political efforts to influence the medium of instruction, such as the placement of non-Mandarin speaking teachers in Chinese schools in 1987, or the mandate to use English to teach mathematics and science in

all schools in 2002. In both instances, there was strong resistance from the vernacular schools, to which the government responded with the possibility of using the Internal Security Act to detain politicians and educators (Collins 2005). Moreover, the use of English to teach mathematics and science was viewed as a move that may be detrimental to the status of the national language (Albury 2020).

The legitimacy of vernacular schools has also been contested by critical claims made by academics, whose voice could have an impact on policy-making or public opinion. For instance, Ibrahim (2007) claimed that ethnic groups in Malaysia were not perturbed by the prominence of the dominant Malay Muslim. She opined that this could be seen in the expansion of Chinese schools in Malaysia in lieu of their strong economic capital. She further claimed that the expansion of Chinese schools was being ignored by the government, and argued that the unsupervised expansion of vernacular schools could cause ethnic polarisation.

In recent times, there were at least two legal attempts to delegitimise vernacular schools in Malaysia (Anbalagan 2020; Lim 2020). The first suit was brought to a federal court by Mohd Khairul Azam Abdul Aziz in November 2019. The suit was rejected on the basis that the federal court did not have judicial purview over matters pertaining to education in Malaysia. A month later, in December 2019, the same lawyer brought the suit to the Kuala Lumpur High Court. This resulted in political groups rallying to protest and intervene in the suit. Abdul Aziz later withdrew his suit in February 2020, stating that his suit overlapped with two other lawsuits on the same matter. These lawsuits were filed by the Association of Peninsular Malay Students (Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung) and the Islamic Educational Development Council. A similar suit was also filed in Kelantan by the Association of Muslim Teachers of Malaysia (Ikatan Guru-Guru Muslim Malaysia).

These suits seek to challenge the constitutionality of vernacular schools, particularly the 1996 Malaysian Education Act Section 17 and Section 28. Section 17 states that vernacular schools (national-type schools) established under Section 28 may retain the use of the vernacular language as a medium of instruction, with Malay taught as a compulsory subject (Malaysian Education Act 2012). The lawsuits claim that Section 17 and 28 contravene with the Malaysian constitution, specifically Article 152. However, in Article 152, clause 1(a) and (b) state that no one will be prohibited nor prevented from using, teaching, or learning other languages, given that Malay is used for official purposes. It is also stated that the State and Federal Government must preserve and sustain the use of languages spoken in communities within the Federation (Malaysian Federal Constitution 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion in the previous section illustrates the discursive spaces in which the legitimacy of language and schools have been contested. This reflects the authority afforded to certain powers to delegitimise and marginalise particular languages and their speakers (see also Morita-Mullaney 2018). The legitimacy of a language can be defined by its characteristics, such as its phonological, lexical, or syntactic characteristics; however, the language may also be granted legitimacy according to the attitudes held by its speakers (Reagan 2016). Bourdieu (1991) states that legitimacy is established by the dominant fraction through the imposition of symbolic production, typically achieved through the use of the sanctioned language for the management and monopoly of the economic capital. Others under the dominant fraction “never really serve the interests of the dominant class except *as a side-effect* and who always threaten to appropriate for their own benefit the power to define the social world that they hold by delegation” (168, emphasis in original). It then becomes the task of the dominant fraction to ensure minority groups never yield a sociopolitical edge or an economic advantage.

One way of achieving this is by propagating the discourse of the dominant group at ideological sites, such as schools. A school, or any educational institute for that matter, plays an active role in appropriating the social world. Schools carry this role since they are legitimised by virtue of being an educational entity, being recognised by a larger educational organisation, or even by subscribing to particular teaching and learning processes. This legitimisation of schools “reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control” (Bernstein 1971: 47). In a school setting, many artifacts are used to establish legitimacy, such as textbooks or curricula, as well as the language used for the medium of instruction (Samuel and Khan 2013; King 2021). A language is further legitimised based on its official status at the national level, its use to construct and transmit knowledge, and even through the status of students or teachers using the language (Doerr and Lee 2009; Rajendram 2022). Languages used in education can also be legitimised by its support for discourse on pertinent education and sociopolitical issues that have an impact beyond the school boundaries (Reagan 2016; Pradhan 2017; Phyak and Sah 2022).

Nonetheless, the position of a school or a language may be questioned in the broader discourse setting. This may be observed through the circumstances surrounding vernacular schools in Malaysia. A prominent space where such discourses may be examined is the public sphere, such as online

discussion forums or threads. In research on language and identity, studies have demonstrated how online discussion forums may offer rich discourse data for the examination of critical issues, such as racism, and ethnic and linguistic tensions (see Harlow 2015; Pantti et al. 2019; KhosraviNik 2022; KhosraviNik and Amer 2022). Increasingly, these online spaces have become a prominent site for active contribution and contestation of different issues. This is mainly due to the rise of public participatory journalism where people can be open in their views, even those perceived as extreme, given the level of anonymity and agency these online spaces offer (Chovanec 2021).

Broadly speaking, online discussion forums, a social media tool, is a discursive space where different communicative affordances may be enacted. Communicative practices that comprise populist or controversial perspectives (KhosraviNik 2022), dissent, counter-hegemonic narratives, and even stereotypes (KhosraviNik and Amer 2022) may be instigated in social media spaces, which may subsequently influence a wider spectrum of audience. Furthermore, while discourse on social media may appear to be bottom-up, where meanings are produced and negotiated by users, these may actually reflect top-down dominant sentiments, as well as those that are marginalised. What social media affords is the space for these meanings to be reiterated in a different discursive context to reach different groups of end-users (Peng et al. 2023).

Recognising the Internet as a meaningful space, this study will leverage on discourse data derived from open and online discussion forum regarding challenges brought against the establishment of vernacular schools in Malaysia. To date, such sources of data have not yet been fully explored for the purpose of understanding public sentiment regarding vernacular schools. Motivated by this gap, the current research aims answer this research question: What are the discourses that revolve around the legitimacy of vernacular schools in Malaysia, as emergent through online discussion forum posts?

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine the discourse challenging the legitimacy of vernacular schools in Malaysia. In this approach, meanings from the discourse data are derived inductively, as the phenomenon being examined is considered novel or under-studied (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Evans et al. 2012). Similar to the study of Lindgren et al. (2020), data of this study come from online discussion forum posts.

The online forum selected for this study is Low Yat (www.lowyat.net) which was created in 2002. The justification for choosing this online forum is due to it being accessible to the public and does not require registration. It also allows anonymous participation, which may be favourable to members of the public when engaging in controversial or sensitive topics (Sugiura et al. 2017). While Low Yat started out as an online website featuring computer products, it has since expanded into a news and lifestyle portal, where it also hosts an online discussion forum. As of February 2023, its online forum (which has five sub-forums) featured more than 590,000 topics, with more than 22,000,000 responses. The wide reach and the amount of engagement are also reasons for choosing Low Yat as the data source. From the online forum, three recent discussion threads were selected to be analysed in this study. The titles of these forums are “Vernacular Schools Should be Abolish” (hereafter Forum 1), initiated on 1 January 2020, with its last post created a day later on 2 January 2020 and “Actually why keep defending vernacular schools?” (hereafter Forum 2), initiated on 26 August 2022 and remains open. The next forum, “*Sekolah* [school] vernacular constitutional” (hereafter Forum 3) was started on 30 May 2022 and the last post was made on the same day. The first forum has 77 posts, the second has 181 posts and the third has 50 posts.

In this study, only posts with written comments were selected for analysis. This comprised posts that discussed the legitimacy of vernacular schools in Malaysia. Written posts that were excluded were those that discussed topics unrelated to the aim of this study, such as comments made about the commentors. Posts that featured only media, such as images or memes, were also excluded. This was to minimise the risk of subjectivity when other multimodal forms are included in the analysis (Komatani et al. 2021). As a result, 103 posts from Forum 1 (29 posts), Forum 2 (52 posts), and Forum 3 (22 posts) were retained for analysis. Due to the temporal nature of posts in discussion forums, and the immediacy of these posts to the legal suits that were taking place at that time, the total number of posts was considered ample to reflect the sociopolitical and cultural perspectives made apparent through language use.

Analysis was carried out through thematisation, guided by the study of Vochočová (2021). This began with the interpretation and understanding of the forum posts from a grounded perspective. Then, meanings derived from the reading of the forum posts were transformed into “higher-level” open codes. Subsequently, axial coding was carried out where open codes that were related were consolidated to establish key themes. This third step was

guided not only by the meanings abstracted from the forum posts, but also by the aim of this study, which was to identify discourses surrounding vernacular schools in Malaysia (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Lindgren et al. 2020).

In the next section, themes and example posts are presented. The posts are labelled chronologically, in the order that they appear in this paper, along with an indication of the forum they came from. The posts are presented verbatim, with informal or colloquial language use restated in English [in brackets] and language other than English, such as Malay, appear in italics and are translated into English [in brackets]. Informal and non-English language use from the original posts were confined to the word or phrasal level; hence, the restatement and translation were inserted immediately after the original word or phrase, so as to maintain transparency (Bashiruddin 2013). Understandable spelling conventions and expressions common to social media were also retained.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative content analysis of the three forum posts yielded six themes, shown in Table 1. The theme that recurred frequently in the forums is “quality of national schools and education system” ($n = 35$), while the theme with low frequency is “vernacular schools are a non-issue” ($n = 3$). These themes collectively address the research question of this study, which is the examination of discourses about the legitimacy of vernacular schools in Malaysia. In the following paragraphs, these themes are explained and discussed through some posts as examples.

Table 1: Themes emergent from the content analysis of the online discussion forums

Theme	Frequency (%)		
	Forum 1 (29 posts)	Forum 2 (52 posts)	Forum 3 (22 posts)
1. Equal treatment of all schools	10 (34.5)	2 (3.8)	1 (4.5)
2. A factor of disunity (or not?)	6 (20.7)	10 (19.2)	5 (22.7)
3. Political impact of vernacular schools	3 (10.3)	–	11 (50.0)
4. Quality of national schools and education system	6 (20.7)	24 (46.2)	5 (22.7)
5. Quality of vernacular schools	3 (10.3)	14 (26.9)	–
6. Vernacular schools are a non-issue	1 (3.4)	2 (3.8)	–

Equal Treatment of All Schools

This theme reflects the perception that all schools should be treated equally, in that if vernacular schools are to be abolished, then other schools which do not follow the national school model, or those that catered to particular groups, should also face the same consequences. This may be seen in Post 1 and Post 2 where the commentors believe that other educational institutions, such as religious schools and universities should be treated the same.

I voted yes. But this also must include *sekolah agama* [religious school] and *madrasah* and *MARA* [*Majlis Amanah Rakyat* – People’s Trust Council] and *UiTM* [Universiti Teknologi MARA]. Anything that goes against *Bangsa Malaysia* [the Malaysian People] should just be burned to the ground. [Post 1 (Forum 1)]

If vernacular schools are unconstitutional Then Mara schools and uitms also can be challenged. *Tu la malas belajar* [That is because they are lazy to study], soon they will open an unintended can of worms. [Post 2 (Forum 3)]

The impact of the post is also heightened through inflammatory language, as it is suggested that schools that go against the Malaysian people be “burned to the ground” and that such opposition towards vernacular schools is due to certain groups perceived to be lazy in their studies. Such language use may incite or provoke further comments or discussion for the purpose of rallying like-minded users regarding the issue and subsequently instigate controversy, or “open a can of worms” (Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia 2021). The intended meaning of Post 1 could be pointing towards an equitable approach in education, as there are no delineations of race or language use in schools. This is perhaps reflective of the concept of the vision school, as proposed by Mahathir Mohamad. A vision school seeks to deconstruct the boundaries separating vernacular and national schools. Schools would be combined, and students would learn their subjects in their vernacular language but socialise with each other in Malay (Malakolunthu 2009).

The idea communicated in Posts 1 and 2 is aligned with Post 3. The post is an affirmative response through the use of the word, “this”, to signify an extent of agreement to the idea of abolishing schools that catered to a particular group. Furthermore, the commentor of Post 3 suggests that schools should operate in the English medium. This may be driven by the assumption

that English is a neutral language, given that this language is not viewed as belonging to any groups in Malaysia and it is a language used globally by many (Tupas 2018).

This. Plus all schools to be in English medium. Then i support. [Post 3 (Forum 1)]

This suggestion is unfortunately untenable in the Malaysian context, as seen in the futile efforts to teach science and mathematics in English (Collins 2005; Sahib and Stapa 2022) and, more broadly, the decolonial discourse that critiques the privilege given to English as a suitable medium of instruction (Tupas 2018). Even when considering the recent plans for science and mathematics education at the primary and secondary school levels, it may be observed that the main emphases are on pedagogy and opportunities for developing skills in these subjects, with little to no attention given to the medium of instruction (Ong 2022).

There are also perceptions that these schools, vernacular and religious, may not be comparable, mainly because these schools operate on different educational pursuits. As such, religious schools should not be considered the equivalent to vernacular schools.

Sekolah agama [religious school] is religious school, not the equivalent of vernacular school, unless vernacular is also focused on being religious. if i want to make it sound absurd, it is akin to having *sekolah* [school] buddhist or *sekolah* hindu or *sekolah* shinto. maybe also similar if compared to christian missionary school, though i do not know what's the mix with modern curriculum is. so to call for *sekolah agama* to be abolished on the tit-for-tat move like as a vernacular school is ... unfair in my opinion. but seriously, if vernacular school can standardise on the same exam and same basic subjects as national schools, i don't see need to abolish either. even *sekolah agama* are standardised. [Post 4 (Forum 2)]

The writer of Post 4 further opines that the curriculum of vernacular schools should be standardised, to be comparable to that of national schools. This, however, may not be a cause for concern as vernacular and national schools all operate on the same curriculum (see report by Centre for Public Policy Studies 2012). The only difference, however, is the additional language subjects that students take, and the medium of instruction used in vernacular schools.

The communication affordance seen in Post 4 is somewhat different than that observed in Posts 1, 2, and 3, where hasty remarks are made. The meanings derived from Posts 1 and 2 would aggravate the challenges currently faced by vernacular school. Meanwhile, Post 4 seems to offer a counterargument through its avoidance of appearing too rash in its conclusions about the types of schools found in the Malaysian educational setting. Nonetheless, there is still an error in the observation made in Post 4 with regards to the curriculum of vernacular schools.

A Factor of Disunity (or Not?)

The second theme reflects perceptions aligned or opposed with the legal suits that challenge the legitimacy of vernacular schools. Specifically, vernacular schools are viewed as a probable reason for disunity among Malaysians. This is similar to the previous theme discussed, in terms of offering glimpses of dissent among the commentors on the online forums. As seen in Post 5, the commentor is of the belief that politicians had allowed autonomy for racial groups in Malaysia “to do what they want”. This is then attributed as the reason for why unity could not be achieved. The commentor offers a solution by claiming that a consolidated or “same” school system similar to that in Indonesia may be an answer to the woes of disunity affecting Malaysia.

Malaysia division problem is because politicians and leaders allowed each race to do what they want. we know this is not good. for example, indonesia more united because all race go same school, speak same language. so vernacular school should be abolish in order to unite malaysians. [Post 5 (Forum 1)]

Similar to Post 5, the commentor of Post 6 also believes that the existence of vernacular schools is the root of division, and that vernacular Chinese schools aspire to wield a “strong influence”, which is indicative of a negative view towards these schools.

Just *kolos la* [Just close *lah* (a common linguistic particle used in colloquial or informal discourse)]. In *kebangsaan* [national schools] also can take mandarin wat [what]. *Sei sohai* [dead idiot] just want name sjkc [*sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina* (national-type Chinese school)] to strong influence. Stop dividing the kids. Just pool them in one strealine [streamlined] school. [Post 6 (Forum 1)]

Post 6 also implies that if students would like to learn the Mandarin language, they could do so by taking it as an additional language subject at national schools operating in Malay as its main medium, akin to the vision school that Mahathir Mohamad proposed more than two decades ago (see Malakolunthu 2009). Furthermore, the perceived division among Malaysians is attributed to these vernacular schools, which, according to scholars, are sites for contestation (Ong et al. 2017). The idea that Malay is an important language is also supported in Post 7, albeit with a twist.

[Malay is] Good for *kerja kroni* [crony work]. *Bahasa penting bila sembang dengan kabel besar. Pasal kabel besar cuma paham bahasa kito, omputih tabuleh* [Malay is good for crony work. Language is important when communicating with “big cable” (an important person who has links/networks). Because a “big cable” will only understand our language (Malay), English will not do]. [Post 7 (Forum 2)]

Post 7, while seemingly agreeing with the notion that vernacular schools are a reason for disunity, is being ironic. This post implies that vernacular schools should be abolished so students would learn Malay, which would allow them to communicate and work with others, particularly those who are well-linked. While this affirms the discussion by Coluzzi (2017) regarding the importance of knowing the Malay language for employment prospects, this post goes further by stating how the learning of this language would facilitate *kroni* work or cronyism, or access to a “big cable”. When presented in such a way, this comment is indirectly stating the contrary that abolishing vernacular schools would bring about more problems. This post also reflects a stereotype regarding race in Malaysia, where particular groups of people may be categorised based on their work ethics (Sarpong and Shahudin 2022; Selvam et al. 2022). Similar to Post 7, in that other issues related to language are brought up, Post 8 does the same.

Because study in SK [*sekolah kebangsaan* (national school)] also still need adhere race quota for Uni intake. [Post 8 (Forum 2)]

Post 8 implies that students of different races may still not be given the opportunity for education, as there is affirmative action and a racial quota that defines the student body composition in Malaysian public educational institutions, as well as other facets of society (see Lee 2022b). As such, the closing of vernacular schools would not necessarily address the issues

of unity and equality in the Malaysian context. This has been cautioned by Means (1978) in his paper on public policies in Malaysia, and has been recently seen in news and research reports (see Khoo 2019; Lee 2022a).

Potential Political Impact of Vernacular Schools

This theme delves into the intersection of vernacular schools within the sociopolitical powers of the larger Malaysian context. In the online forums examined, there are posts that positioned vernacular schools as a space for political moves or a form of political leverage. This may be observed in Post 9, which implies the use of vernacular schools as leverage to promote certain political agendas.

The one dividing us are politicians. The group which started this suit to declare vernacular schools unconstitutional are their tools/fools.
[Post 9 (Forum 3)]

In this post, a direct reference is made to those who had questioned the constitutional legitimacy of vernacular schools. Those who brought up the legal suits are viewed as both “tools” and “fools” used by others who wield power and have vested interests in certain political agendas, mainly to “divide”. This agenda has been reported by various researchers in the examination of exclusionary discourse practices that promote an “us” versus “them” division in various sociopolitical aspects in Malaysia (Rajandran and Lee 2023). More specifically, this divide has been propagated by those who promote the rhetoric of fear and anxiety as a strategy to maintain the power and privilege of the dominant fraction (Mohamad Jamil 2021).

The political impact of vernacular schools may also be observed in Post 10, which explains how the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, would still be able to succeed in the economic and political arenas. This was hastily compared to the situation of Thailand (see discussion by Wongsurawat 2014).

There are reason why our education system are still divided by races. The politician want it to be separated so that it is easier to control a divided small group than a united big group. By having the people divided, they can easily please any races at their convenience to get a short term support. Of course, these supports are very situation dependable. Also in my opinion, the Malay politician themselves are afraid of cultural assimilation, although they are the one shouting for it. Look at our neighbour Thailand, the ethnic Chinese was once freely

practising their culture and having their very own world. Similar to Malaysia, the Thai felt threaten by the Chinese control in economy and education. The Thai launch a ‘cultural assimilation’ to force the Chinese to embrace Thai cultures; no more Chinese name, no more Chinese school, must speak Thai instead of native language, etc. But the Chinese are one hell flexible race, they mixed successfully with the Thai, producing cross-breed that holding Thai identity but with Chinese mindset in the background, they gain further control on the economy, to the extend the Thai parliament. Same thing could happen here in Malaysia, once the Chinese was forced to the dead end, they will mixed with the Malay (I know alot of Malay man has Chinese Amoi [woman] fetish) and start producing a new race to take over Putrajaya. Maybe that is the time when you can see someone with Chinese background become the prime minister. [Post 10 (Forum 1)]

While it may be argued that the perspective shared in Post 10 is merely conjecture and hypothetical, it does reflect the stereotypical discourse surrounding the Chinese community in Malaysia, in that they have been said to be resilient (see discussion by Gabriel 2014). Yet, while seemingly unproblematic, this view may not encapsulate and subsequently discount the challenges, both historical and current, that the Chinese Malaysians face in different aspects of their livelihoods (Chin 2022).

Quality of National Schools and Education System

Content regarding the quality of the Malaysian national schools and the education system can be found in the online discussion forums analysed in this study. Most of these posts question the quality of the Malaysian national schools. The posts also illuminate stereotypical views held towards national schools and those who attend these schools. In other words, commentators defended vernacular schools through their disagreement with the prospect of abolishing vernacular schools. Let us consider Post 11, from Forum 1, where the commentator provides a hypothetical negative outcome if students were to attend national schools.

Why abolish vernacular schools? If go *sekolah kebangsaan* [national school], the children of nons [non-Malays] learn to become common criminals and disobey the law. Look at the Lowyat incident and look at the protest today at Sogo. Even the police cannot stop these people. Ask any non [non-Malays] this question...do you want your child to

go to *kebangsaan* [national] school, mix with people who are beyond the control of the law, and grow up to become like them? My answer is: no. No. NO! So die die [an expression of exaggeration] MUST protect our vernacular schools. No need to listen to those *tidak ikhlas hati punya orang* [people who are not sincere]....*mahu perpaduan dari tahap sekolah tetapi tak mahu mansuhkan sistem kuota atau sistem matrikulasi atau sekolah-sekolah berasaskan satu agama atau satu kaum* [they want unity from the school level but do not want to abolish the quota system or the matriculation system, or religious or racial schools]. I don't want my children to grow up to become insincere, devious, ingenious little punks as well. P.S. Besides, if never learn vernacular language, how can *pendatang balik negara asal?* [immigrants return to their countries of origin?] [Post 11 (Forum 1)]

This claim is further supported by bringing up notable racial incidents in Malaysia, namely a brawl that occurred at Plaza Low Yat in July 2015 instigated by an alleged theft, and the peaceful protest at Sogo on 1 January 2020, supporting the teaching of Jawi. The instigator of these incidents, according to the commentor, are implied to be those from national schools. The commentor also mentions that if vernacular schools were abolished to achieve unity, then other aspects found in the education system that did not promote unity should also face similar consequences. The post then ends satirically by implying that the vernacular languages need to be learned to allow non-Malays to return to their places of origin, reflecting an exclusionary discourse prevalent in Malaysia (see discussion by Gabriel 2015 and Mohamad Jamil 2021).

The perspective illustrated in Post 11 is reiterated in Post 12, where the commentor claims to have been a student at a national school that had disciplinary and academic problems. The commentor also mentions how education in Malaysia suffered under the former education minister, Maszlee Malik, who held office from 2018 to 2020. The commentor then contrasts the students typically associated with national schools with students from vernacular schools by positively evaluating the latter.

I come from *sekolah kebangsaan* [national school]. Despite the unity education I also feel all sort of division at school and work. I was also frustrated at smoking, indiscipline [discipline] problem, gangsterism and students deliberately not listening to teachers and teachers were *ponteng* [skipped] classes and even sleeping during classes. Overall *sekolah kebangsaan* level is really poor and now with mazlee [former

Minister of Education] our education really down the drain. And Then when I went to college and uni, I mixed with vernacular classmates and. I was impressed with their work ethic and they were way ahead of us. [Post 12 (Forum 1)]

The perspective seen in Post 12 is seen also in Post 13. While initially supporting the abolishment of vernacular schools based on irrelevance to current times, the commentor states that more languages should be learned to avoid the negative consequences of monolingualism.

This is also true. If *sekolah agama* [religious schools] can exist, vernacular school can exist. that being said, i dont think either should exist anymore. vernacular school came from an era when people had poor intercommunication ability due to language barrier. Now that most people speak either *melei* [euphemism for Malay] or *england* [English], that shouldn't be a problem anymore. Gotta encourage the *melei* [Malays] to learn more than *melei* [the Malay language] though. otherwise, the whole lazy attitude of mono-lingualism will come in. However, I would still send my kid to a vernacular school at least for SJK [*sekolah jenis kebangsaan* (national-type school, vernacular)], simply because the horrors that I have witness in SMK [*sekolah menengah kebangsaan* (national secondary school)]. Kids are gonna be kids, but SK [*sekolah kebangsaan* (national school, primary level)] and SMK kids give me the impression that kids can also be monkeys with no discipline. At least SJKC [*sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina* (national-type Chinese school)] to build some character before sending to SMK for Lessons of hard knocks. [Post 13 (Forum 2)]

The commentor of Post 13 claims how national schools have disciplinary problems and how vernacular schools support positive character building, which could prepare students to face difficult challenges seen in the national school environment. In fact, Post 13 highlights negative stereotypes held against the Malays; furthermore, this post also appears to be covertly racist, as seen through the modified spelling for the word “Malay” (see discussion on hostile language use in Swift 2020).

So far, we have seen posts claiming how disciplinary problems were a challenge at national schools. Besides these, there were comments on the low academic quality of national schools, which was believed to have benefitted vernacular school students. This is illustrated in Post 14, where the comment appreciated students from national schools for lowering the passing threshold to score an A in national exams. Again, this illustrates a negative stereotypical

view towards a certain race. This was not the case with vernacular language subjects as they are typically offered only at vernacular schools, such as Chinese and Tamil language subjects, and their related literary subjects.

From students of vernacular school. -We thank students of SK [*sekolah kebangsaan* (national school)] for dragging down the passing mark & threshold to score ‘A’ in Govt exams. -We hate students of SK for not dragging down the abovementioned for subjects they don’t take, eg. *Bahasa Cina!* [Chinese language!] *Bahasa Tamil!* [Tamil language!] *Sastera Cina!* [Chinese literature!] etc. [Post 14 (Forum 2)]

The same observation may be made on Post 15, where the commentors reflected on and were surprised by their Malaysian Certificate of Education results.

Who cares about top 10 when it’s open secret that grading curve is adjusted thanks to certain ppl. Till today I still dun [don’t] understand how I managed to score my A for my SPM [*Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education, equivalent to the ordinary level)] lol. [Post 15 (Forum 2)]

The perceptions that students from national schools have disciplinary issues, and that the academic performance of national school students is claimed to be low (to the point where it benefits others by lowering the passing mark) are present in all forums. This illustrates negative discourse and stereotypes that surround the national school, even within forums that discussed the possibility of abolishing vernacular schools.

It should be noted, however, that the discourse surrounding national schools in recent times may not have been negative in the past. This may be observed in Post 16, where the commentor, who referred to himself as an “uncle”, remembers how national schools used to be the main choice for parents given their quality.

During *unker* [uncle’s] time (80’s), in cities, *SKs* [*sekolah kebangsaan* (national schools)] were the main choice, parents would to send their kids. Now me as parent, feel differently. Quality education is regarded as one of the important elements of better quality of life for my kid. [Post 16 (Forum 3)]

The commentor of Post 16 does not feel that the same quality of education can be found today, as it had been back in the 1980s. The negative perception towards national schools may be due to the broader discourse surrounding

the education system in Malaysia. For example, through the analysis of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2018, Hin (2020) discussed how the academic achievement of Malaysian students trails behind its neighbours within the region. This was also discussed by Perera and Asadullah (2019), where the underperformance of Malaysia in PISA was partially due to the lack of qualified and dedicated teachers and the limited amount of support offered to students from their immediate surroundings.

Quality of Vernacular Schools

There are also posts that mentioned the positive qualities of vernacular schools, albeit not as many in comparison to posts that discussed the problems of national schools. The analysis of these posts illustrates different aspects that contributed to the good quality of vernacular schools, including a distinct Malaysian identity, in comparison to other ASEAN countries (Post 17).

Vernacular school has become malaysia's advantage over other asean country. [Post 17 (Forum 1)]

Vernacular schools are also perceived to instil positive values among the students (Post 18).

Because vernacular schools teach us to be *rajin* [hardworking], diligent, dont always expect *suap2* [to be spoon-fed], healthy competition and more good moral values. *tu jer* [that's all from me]. [Post 18 (Forum 2)]

These schools also afforded the opportunity to learn another language (Post 19, affirmed by the commentor of Post 20).

Planning to send my kids to SJK den SMK [*sekolah jenis kebangsaan* (national-type school), vernacular, then *sekolah menengah kebangsaan* (national secondary school)]. We think it is good for them have the basic (Mandarin) reading and writing established. We will let them decide whether they want to take Mandarin subject in secondary school. [Post 19 (Forum 2)]

SJKC + IS [*sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina* (national-type Chinese school) + international school] for secondary is way forward bro Most SMK [*sekolah menengah kebangsaan* (national secondary school)] teacher quality and dedication is dissapointing. Some are really good though. [Post 20 (Forum 2)]

Moreover, vernacular schools are also perceived to prepare students for future employment (Post 21).

Yeah not in top 10, but if it wasn't for vernacular school, I'd probably won't be having my current job. SPM results is one thing, real life results is another. You wanna progress as a worker without niche technical skills? Mandarin proficiency is your answer. [Post 21 (Forum 2)]

When comparing these posts with others, a clearer picture of the public discourse regarding vernacular schools may be formed. For instance, Post 18 is comparable to Post 13, in that the commentators highlighted the positive values, directly or indirectly, that students may experience or be taught at a vernacular school setting. This is also observed in Post 21, which contrasts with Post 7 where it is claimed that the Malay language is valuable for certain work circumstances.

All these point towards the instrumental value that a certain vernacular language, Mandarin, holds. As discussed by Ting and Teng (2021) and Ong and Troyer (2022), the ability to use Mandarin is viewed positively given the growing global prominence of the language. Both these studies also exemplified how Mandarin has been used by speakers in various domains of their life; nevertheless, this has also inadvertently affected the status of other Chinese dialects, whose use now has been confined only to the older generation. On this juncture, it is also noteworthy to mention that Tamil schools in Malaysia have been experiencing a decline in enrolment; furthermore, the socioeconomic status of many Indian families may limit their children's engagement with education (Nagappan 2022).

Vernacular Schools are a Non-issue

The next theme is of posts discussing how the legitimacy of vernacular schools should not be perceived as a problem. This theme illustrates dissenting views against the legal suits that were taken. There are various reasons given to explain why vernacular schools are a non-issue. Post 22 implies that vernacular schools should not be seen as a problem as there were other vices, such as gambling, which is a more serious issue. Post 22 also includes a rhetorical question to the dominant and conservative parties in Malaysia, to indicate the perceived silence on their part regarding issues of gambling.

Why abolish school ? why not abolish *magnum, toto, damacai* [names of lottery companies in Malaysia] n [and] *genting?* [referring to Genting Highlands, where gambling is permitted] *PAS* n *UMNO puas hati judi* ? [Are PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia i.e., Malaysian Islamic Party) and UMNO (United Malays National Organization) happy with those who want to gamble?]. [Post 22 (Forum 1)]

When cast against other social issues, Post 22 appeared to be questioning the seriousness of the problem of vernacular schools. And to be exact, whether vernacular schools are actually a problem. This may be related to the issue of selectiveness in Malaysia, which, according to Zainal and Nasir (2021), may be seen through the balancing or even dominance of certain preferences and biases. In this situation, certain practices may be overlooked while others may end up a preoccupation of the people. Selectiveness within the Malaysian context also does not entail fair treatment within the same group. A case to consider is the punishment meted against Muslim women if they committed adultery or consumed alcohol in public, which is not enforced for their male counterpart (Zainal and Nasir 2021).

Vernacular schools are also perceived as a non-issue due to it being constitutional, as commented in Post 23. Here the commentor states how the legitimacy of the vernacular school is enshrined in the federal constitution and should not be questioned. The commentor also mentions how certain groups, having been offered privileged, are fighting for more.

Not considered an offence if another language than Malay is used as a medium of instruction, adding that this is safeguarded under Article 152 (1) (a) of the Federal Constitution. Everyone know this, but they very *berani* [brave] want challenge. *melayu* [Malays] got their *hak bumi* [native rights]. *cina* [Chinese] can learn and use *cina* as they wish. already part of agreement but they turn greedy and very bad, want *buli* [bully], *tindas* [suppress] and even *plobok ejek mengejek* [provoke name-calling]. [Post 23 (Forum 3)]

The continued existence of vernacular schools may be viewed as a threat by the dominant fraction, in that there are other groups that could wield a sociopolitical or economic edge over them. To date, other non-Malay groups are still viewed as an obstacle to the prominence of the Malays. This, unfortunately, has become a challenge to efforts for interethnic dialogue or cooperation (Saleem 2021).

Malaysian Vernacular Schools in Online Public Discourse

From the examination of online forum posts, this study shows how certain communication affordances are enacted. Similar to that discussed by KhosraviNik and Amer (2022), as well as Peng et al. (2023), discourses of dissent and stereotypes were found in the forum posts. There were also claims that were made hastily, or conjectures that were not grounded in evidence. These discourses, emergent through the language use on these online forums, may be considered a reflection of the larger sociopolitical and economic circumstances of Malaysia (see Morita-Mullaney 2018; Maddamsetti 2020; Swift 2020). In fact, this may be observed through related research, such as those that recount experiences of negative encounters experienced by non-Malays around Malaysia. For instance, Lino and Hashim (2019) discussed how non-Malay students have been made to feel as “aliens” even in their own country, or second-class citizens. The same was found in an earlier study by Lino et al. (2017), where some non-Malay students reported being overlooked or their opinions being deemed insignificant or trivial.

According to Crump (2014), these signify social forces exhibited through discourse practices in determining the possibilities for individuals or communities. Moreover, social hierarchies became apparent from the way languages and racial groups are discursively linked with one another. In other words, through the posts made on these public forums and linking their meanings with the larger ecosocial discourse, it became visible how individuals representing different racial communities interacted and related to one other. These may be observed from the themes, where there are discourses supportive of having only national schools for the purpose of creating and upholding unity; on the contrary, there are discourses that reflected how vernacular schools were perceived to offer a better schooling experience and to hone better academic capabilities. There are also posts where commentators called for the equal treatment of all schools, and that vernacular schools did not cause disunity. These themes reflected more than the dynamicity of discourse; they also indicate the fluidity of perspectives towards race, language, and identity within a particular and temporal sociocultural circumstance (Crump 2014).

What is interesting is that only the Chinese vernacular school is mentioned in these posts. Nothing is said about the Tamil vernacular schools or the Indian community. Hence, when comparing the two vernacular languages discussed in this study, Mandarin appeared to be more prominent. This may be due to the growing influence of the People’s Republic of China not only

in Malaysia, but in other parts of the Southeast Asian region. While there may be individuals who may view this as a sociopolitical or economic threat, the bilateral relationship held between Malaysia and China has constantly been evolving, with mutual economic interest being set at the forefront (Yeoh 2019). As such, in media at large, the representation of China in Malaysia has been mostly state-dominated and positive (Ng 2022). Furthermore, with the discourse of China taking the centre stage, it comes as no surprise that there would be traces of exclusionary discourse, especially those grounded in fear (see also discussion by Mohamad Jamil 2021). This may indicate a higher privilege afforded to the Chinese community, and as argued by Crump (2014), such discourses should not be viewed merely as a static phenomenon; rather, they reflect the larger meaning crucial to the understanding of the broader discursive space inhabited by multiple individuals. When such a space is acknowledged, a larger ecosocial system may be traced, in which social hierarchies may be identified and understood through their cycles of reconfiguration. The dynamic changes affecting social hierarchies in a discursive space are inevitable due to the constant interaction of meanings put forth by individuals.

At a broader level, these themes are not surprising; in fact, they provide some insights as to why legal suits against vernacular schools in Malaysia were taken. As mentioned earlier, schools could hold symbolic power that may advance the sociopolitical and cultural agenda of a society or of a nation. Within schools, there is also the sanctioned language for education, and the choice of the medium of instruction would offer a way in to establish authority over the people (see Bourdieu 1991). Hence, by firmly establishing Malay as the main medium of education, and subsequently rendering vernacular schools redundant, it would strengthen the dominance of the majority. This has been a concerted effort taken by certain groups of people, despite the history of vernacular schools in Malaysia and the constitution that allows the teaching of vernacular languages. More specifically, through history and in recent times, there is continuous ebb and flow on the perspectives of the legitimacy of Malaysian vernacular school. This places the discourse surrounding Malaysian vernacular schools as one that is in constant “being” due to the negotiation of what it means to be between social actors in the sociopolitical realm.

Despite these observations, it is worth mentioning that members of the dominant group do not necessarily agree with actions that seek to delegitimise vernacular schools, or other multicultural aspects found in Malaysia. In fact, Koh and Harris (2020) pointed out in their study that university-aged Malay

students were found to be aware of exclusionary practices against their peers of other ethnicities, for which they found to be distasteful and unwarranted. On the other hand, from a religious point of view, Hussien (2022) states that Islamic education promotes the recognition and appreciation towards diversity, mainly through the teaching of *Ummah*. There is also the emerging segment of liberal Malays who have been adapting a cosmopolitan approach to living, which includes being selective with sociocultural and religious aspects of their Malay identity (Khoo 2014; Zainal and Nasir 2021; Saleem 2021). These discourse practices challenge the essentialist notion of identity. What may be observed has been discussed by Crump (2014) where identity is not either one or the other; rather, identity is a construct that constantly changes. Furthermore, it is through the constant flux that the fixed notions of language and race are challenged. What they are, instead, are temporal categories that are reconstructed regularly across diverse and emergent social and local circumstances.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this study was to examine the discourses revolving around the legitimacy of vernacular schools in Malaysia. This study was spurred by recent legal suits taken up by private Malaysian individuals and associations against Malaysian vernacular schools. By employing a qualitative content analysis, this study analysed data from three public online forums hosted on Low Yat. Six themes became apparent, which were the: (1) equal treatment of all schools; (2) factor of disunity (or not?); (3) political impact of vernacular schools; (4) quality of national schools and education system; (5) quality of vernacular schools; and finally, (6) vernacular schools are a non-issue.

Specifically, this study provided insights into the intersection between the turbulent history of vernacular schools, the recent legal suits challenging these schools' legitimacy, and online discussion forum posts regarding vernacular schools. This intersection reflects a continuum of possibilities that represent the dynamic nature of language, race, and identity. Through this, it is possible to see how different dimensions of identity intersect between individual stories and the broader discursive practices. Furthermore, in this study, it may be observed that the larger discourse surrounding vernacular schools may still be volatile. There are still discourses that position vernacular schools in Malaysia as a hindrance to the dominant fraction's attempts at growing their power and symbolic production.

While this study was able to shed light on the intersection between broader discourse and meanings derived from language use in an online discussion forum, further research is still needed. Future studies should consider increasing the types of social media platforms analysed. It would be valuable to compare different digital platforms to determine whether there are underlying discursive threads that extend across them. Furthermore, other forms of data, such as multimodal elements should be considered. In this study, some of the data that were excluded were images or memes, which may hold potentially valuable information regarding the dialogicity of arguments, multiliteracy of users, as well as pertinent issues contextualised through other forms of modalities (see Navera et al. 2019; Soh 2020). Other possible avenues to explore could be the real-time or synchronous interaction between interlocutors, where the research focus could be on implicit sociocultural issues occurring at the micro-level of discourse.

NOTE

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Discourse data used in this study were derived from an online public forum where participants are anonymous. Care was taken to exclude any identifying information.

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