

# Chinese Elementary Education in Malaysia: Development through Adaptation and Change

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## Abstract

Social change affects the progress of education and requires adaptation to evolving circumstances. Malaysia is experiencing significant political and economic transformations in development. This process of modernisation takes place in a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic setting. Recent advancements in information technology, the advent of IR.4, and the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic have also shaped the direction of Malaysian socio-economic development and change. In the sphere of education, Chinese elementary schools continue to contribute to the advancement of education in the country. Their continued presence is a matter of vital interest to the Chinese community. This study examines the development of Chinese elementary education in Malaysia including issues concerning its sustainability and the need to adapt and change to overcome challenges and problems. The focus of attention is placed on the current situation of CESs, their role in national education, and issues pertaining to curriculum development and teaching evaluation.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Chinese elementary education, adaptation, change, sustainability

## Introduction

Malaysia is a multiethnic country comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other communities. The Chinese community maintains Chinese schools as a form of mother-tongue education. Chinese education has a long history in Malaysia spanning over 200 years. It has a large enrollment, complete with a comprehensive structure and standardised teaching in Chinese that is unique among the Chinese overseas. The Chinese education system comprises 1,301 elementary schools,

62 secondary schools, and three university colleges in which instruction is conducted in Mandarin as well as in selected educational activities and in administration.

Chinese education is constantly undergoing changes and transformations arising from a host of causes of which the important ones are changes in the state, problems of the economy, challenges posed by digitisation and new modes of teaching and learning, and the emergence of new technologies.

Following the first change of government in 2018 after more than 60 years of independence, the Government initiated a fixed budgetary funding to Chinese elementary schools (CESs). Selected secondary schools as well as the three Chinese university colleges were also recipients of limited funding on irregular occasions. A further change of government in 2020 saw a return to official inattention and neglect. The COVID-19 pandemic and financial constraints of the Chinese business sector also undermined community efforts in their support of Chinese education.

New information technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR.4) have created opportunities and challenges for Chinese education. Digitisation and other new technological platforms are compelling teaching and learning at all levels and schools to adapt to changes. The upgrading of digital skills and infrastructure has to be accelerated. The coupling of online and offline modes of teaching and learning have led to increasingly diverse and complex educational environments, involving cross-disciplinary and cross-domain patterns that generate co-operation as well as conflicts of interest. The rapid rise of the “Internet+” has inevitably driven Chinese schools to implement educational modernisation and reforms as a matter of urgency.

In the face of rapidly advancing technological advancement, education is witnessing the adoption of cutting-edge teaching methods in favour of traditional approaches based on lecture-based instruction, computer-assisted instruction, or electronic teaching. Instead, online teaching, multimedia instruction, and AI-based instructional systems have taken their place. At the same time, modern learning theories, such as autonomous learning, co-operative learning, and deep learning are emphasised in teaching practices. These changes are driven by the new requirements posed by the era of digitalisation, automation, artificial intelligence, and big data in modern education. These processes have been accelerated as well as constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is inevitable that technological transformations will bring about the introduction of new concepts and technologies to the classroom, which will demand efforts to strategise the future path of development of Chinese education.

As one of the key components of Chinese education in Malaysia, CESs play a pivotal role in preserving Chinese mother-tongue education. Under the Malaysian national education system, elementary education is divided into three language streams of Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. The medium of instruction in national, Chinese and Tamil schools is the Malay language which is also the national language, Chinese, and Tamil respectively. National schools come under the authority

of the Ministry of Education, while Chinese and Tamil schools are jointly managed by the Ministry of Education, private education institutions, and school boards.<sup>1</sup> In this manner, Chinese schools have maintained normal growth and are attracting an increasing enrollment of non-Chinese students, and operating on a solid foundation built on maintaining a competent level of teaching and management.

However, apart from facing policy restrictions, CESs also encounter new challenges such as declining enrollment, the need for qualitative improvement, and maintenance of sustainable development. These are crucial issues that deserve serious attention.

With two centuries of continuous operation and being an integral component of the national education system, it is imperative that the existence of CESs be sustainable. This existence cannot be assumed but must be secured and safeguarded by constant adaptation to changing circumstances. With independence in 1957, the Chinese community was assured that CESs would enjoy the following benefits:

- The Education Act of 1996 reaffirms that all national-type CESs are government-aided schools that (1) provide appropriate primary education for children from the age of six, (2) the use of Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction, and (3) the teaching of Malay and English as compulsory language subjects.
- Mandarin is designated as the primary medium of instruction, in the conduct of examinations, and as the language of administration.
- Existing CESs are established by their respective school boards and not by the government. The provisions of the Education Act of 1996 stipulates that each Chinese elementary school must have a board of governors to manage the school and administer its affairs.
- An essential mission of CESs is to preserve Chinese culture as an essential component of the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the country in which mutual understanding and respect are fostered among different ethnic groups to build a harmonious society (UCSCAM, 2013).

Although the 1,301 CESs are a part of the national education system, the official allocation of funds to these schools is miniscule compared with those of national elementary schools. Providing sufficient funds for maintaining and developing CESs has become an indispensable community responsibility of the Chinese. Current enrollment in CESs is 507,177 (UCSTAM, 2021).<sup>2</sup> While this number has been declining, that of non-Chinese students has increased especially in urban areas where the practical value of Mandarin is seen to be growing. Declining births and increasing out-migration to towns and elsewhere have led to declining enrollments in many CESs while others are showing non-Chinese students in the majority. In 2016, 15% or close to 100,000 students were non-Chinese among whom 77,000 were Malays, 13,000 Indians, and 8,000 others (Qian, 2018).

It is becoming increasingly evident that while Chinese schools offer mother-tongue education, at the same time they are teaching Chinese as a second language to non-Chinese students. This raises questions on whether Chinese schools should continue to focus solely on mother-tongue education or to depend on non-Chinese students to continue to operate as Chinese schools.

The development of Chinese elementary education is to ensure their continued existence and survival in the country. This implies the presence of many favourable conditions including access to official budgetary allocation, maintaining the relevance of Chinese education in nurturing talents of all ethnic communities, ensuring the current system of operation and management, and continued improvement through adaptation and change. This study will examine the future of Malaysian Chinese elementary education with special focus on the following objectives:

- To encourage a continuous, dynamic, and sustainable development mindset to draw insights and lessons from valuable ideas, traditions, and experiences of the past as well as valuable ideas and traditions to address current realities, identify major problems, and explore possibilities for further development to prepare for the future.
- To explore the commonalities in development and trends in education. This will be achieved by studying the relevant components of education and related factors and their relationships to introduce comprehensive and co-ordinated approaches and strategies of development.
- To raise the survival capacity of Malaysian Chinese elementary education. Apart from advocating the unbiased and open-minded treatment of Chinese elementary education within the national education system, this study also explores how it may be better integrated into the Malaysian nation-building agenda of working towards a developed nation with a prosperous multicultural society in the twentieth-first century.

Chinese education in Malaysia is a long-term community project of the Chinese. It has evolved from the traditional private instruction of the classics to the modern-day comprehensive school; from the education of immigrant Chinese to that of the citizens of today; and from the focus on China to that of the adopted country to cultivate national as well as ethnic identities in the context of an ethnically diverse country (Wang, 2019). From its early beginning in the nineteenth century, Chinese education underwent a vicissitude of change through the Japanese Occupation during World War Two, the revival and expansion during the 1970s and 1980s, and reform from the 1990s (Tay, 1998, 1999, 2001 & 2003).

There is a vast literature on Malaysian Chinese education. A key feature of current literature on Malaysian Chinese education is focused on two major themes, namely, its history and political contestation vis-à-vis official policies on education.<sup>3</sup> Issues pertaining to the development of Chinese education, especially that of sustainable development, hardly receive serious attention. There is an

urgent need to examine these issues that have a direct impact on the prospects of Chinese education. This study will examine changes in student enrollment, curriculum development, evaluation reforms, and substantive development since 2010. The findings may provide insights in formulating practical recommendations on plans to safeguard the continued progress and future prospects of Chinese education.

## Methodology

A holistic approach is used to explore aspects of the development status, student sources, curriculum development, evaluation reform, and sustainable development of CESs.

An online questionnaire survey is employed to compile basic data pertaining to the personal background of respondents; the development status of the schools according to a Likert five-point scale; and issues on “sustainable” development by means of closed- and open-ended questions to obtain the opinions of the interviewees. In all, 379 valid questionnaires were received.

The sample was drawn from schools in different states and regions of the country (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Sample Schools, 2021*

School	Number of people	Percentage (%)
Type	Large	101
	Medium	144
	Micro	134
	Total	379
State	Sabah & Sarawak	88
	South Malaysia	42
	Central Malaysia	116
	Northern Malaysia	124
	West Malaysia East Coast	9
	Total	379
	Rural Countryside	203
Region	Urban City	176
	Total	379

Source: Based on online questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews conducted by the authors between 2020 and 2021.

The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) scale of 0.950 confirms the high reliability of the survey; and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.929, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity showing a significant result ( $p < 0.01$ , Sig. “0.000”) indicates good validity of the questionnaire.

Among the respondents were Chinese elementary school principals. They have a good understanding of different aspects of the school administration and are familiar with the challenges facing future development. The survey sample of 379 principals comprised 30.1% males and 69.9% females. The majority of 75.7% was aged 46 to 59, while those aged 31 to 45 made up the next largest group. The majority or 86.6% possess a university degree or higher qualifications. Just more than 75% have a teaching experience of 20 years or more, while 19.8% have served from 11 to 19 years.

Apart from consulting selected school principals, extensive use was made of relevant documents such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint, annual reports of UCSCAM and UCSTAM, Chinese newspapers and relevant research papers and publications as primary sources of reference.

### Issues of Development

The current development of CESs is largely concerned with four issues. These are the development of the school, the welfare of teachers and students, and internal and external relationships or the community relations of the school. The overall development status from the perspective of these four variables shows a relatively high mean value exceeding 3.0 on the five-point Likert scale (Table 2).

The status of school development in terms of overall educational ideals, ethos, and management and educational quality show favourable mean value scores of 4.10 and 4.02 respectively. However, the mean values for facilities and curriculum development are lower and suggest much room for improvement. The status of teacher development measured in terms of subject knowledge, professional attitude, professional development, and teaching abilities shows respective mean values of 4.07 or above. In comparison, the mean scores for educational and instructional knowledge and educational research activities are slightly above 3.0 and calls for action on improvement.

As for the students, their ability to forge good peer relationships is satisfactory. But the mean scores for academic performance, learning styles, social practices, study habits, and academic workload are not as ideal as required. In community relations, CESs perform well in social participation, parental evaluation of schools, parental communication with schools, community care, and social image as shown by good scores of mean values above 4.03. The exception is the relatively low score for inter-school exchange and needs efforts to upgrade their performance.

Differential analyses were conducted on selected indicators of school development status. The results showed that factors such as gender, age, educational background, academic qualifications, and the state of the schools concerned did not exhibit significant differences. These differences were manifested in terms of the types and location of the schools.

**Table 2***Likert Scale Analyses of Selected Indicators of Chinese Elementary Schools, 2021*

Level 1 Indicators	Level 2 indicators	Average value	Standard deviation	Overall mean value ± Standard deviation
School Development	The school's development orientation, school goals and the practice of Chinese language education	4.18	0.69	4.05 ± 0.54
	The school's management system and its implementation	4.17	0.66	
	The quality of education and teaching in the school	4.02	0.63	
	The school's curriculum, teaching materials and related resources	3.98	0.68	
	School style, teaching style and learning style of the school	4.10	0.68	
	Facilities of the school (e.g. classrooms, library, gymnasium, etc.)	3.84	0.84	
Faculty Development	Teacher's professional ethics, teaching attitude, love and responsibility for students	4.16	0.62	4.07 ± 0.52
	Teachers' Subject Matter Expertise	4.20	0.59	
	Teachers' philosophy and knowledge of education and teaching	3.98	0.65	
	Faculty Teaching Competencies and Qualifications	4.07	0.60	
	Professional development and growth of teachers	4.15	0.64	
	Teachers' educational research activities	3.83	0.73	
Internal and external school relations	Student Academic Performance	3.59	0.66	3.72 ± 0.53
	Students acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning processes such as scenarios, interactions, discussions, and self-exploration	3.60	0.72	
	Students' participation in club activities and social practice	3.57	0.73	
	Students forming peer relationships	4.14	0.63	
	Students' study habits (e.g., pre-study, review, active questioning, etc.)	3.53	0.72	
	Students' school workload	3.87	0.62	
Student Development	The school's initiative to learn from the successes of other schools	3.74	0.72	4.04 ± 0.52
	Parental (e.g., PTA) and community (board of directors, other associations) involvement in school education	4.04	0.77	
	Parents' evaluation of schools and teachers	4.07	0.59	
	Communication between school and parents	4.15	0.59	
	The school's humanistic care for the community	4.03	0.64	
	The social image and reputation of the university	4.18	0.63	

The maintenance of internal and external relations of schools is largely satisfactory, with values exceeding 4.0. The only exception being the initiative to learn from the successes of other schools.

The types of schools according to enrollment show real differences in the scores by school development, student development, and community relations of schools (Table 3). The general pattern is that the larger the enrollment the higher the average score. This is a significant finding and confirms that maintaining micro-sized schools remains a serious challenge to sustainable development of Chinese schools. They are thus not able to fulfill their role to serve the Chinese community. The shortage of students is likely to persist and worsen in the future. They are uneconomical to manage and operate and represent the inefficient use of community resources.

**Table 3**

*Differences in School Development Status according to Size of Enrolment, 2021 Different School Types*

School Type Grouping		Average value	Standard deviation	Standard Error	F-value	Sig. (Two-tailed test)
School Development	Large	4.23	0.53	0.05	15.019	0.000**
	Medium	4.10	0.47	0.04		
	Micro	3.87	0.56	0.05		
Faculty Development	Large	4.10	0.53	0.05	0.216	0.806
	Medium	4.06	0.49	0.04		
	Micro	4.05	0.56	0.05		
Student Development	Large	3.90	0.46	0.05	12.467	0.000**
	Medium	3.73	0.50	0.04		
	Micro	3.56	0.56	0.05		
Internal and external school relations	Large	4.15	0.51	0.05	4.319	0.014**
	Medium	4.04	0.48	0.04		
	Micro	3.95	0.54	0.05		

\*\* indicates a significant difference at the 0.05 level.

Note: The enrollment of large schools is approximately 1,050 or more; that of medium schools is between 150 and 1,050 students; and micro schools are those with 150 or fewer students.

The rural-urban dichotomy is another factor in determining the status of school and student development (Table 4). Rural schools show significantly lower mean values in both dimensions compared to urban schools, meaning that they lag significantly behind the development of urban schools.

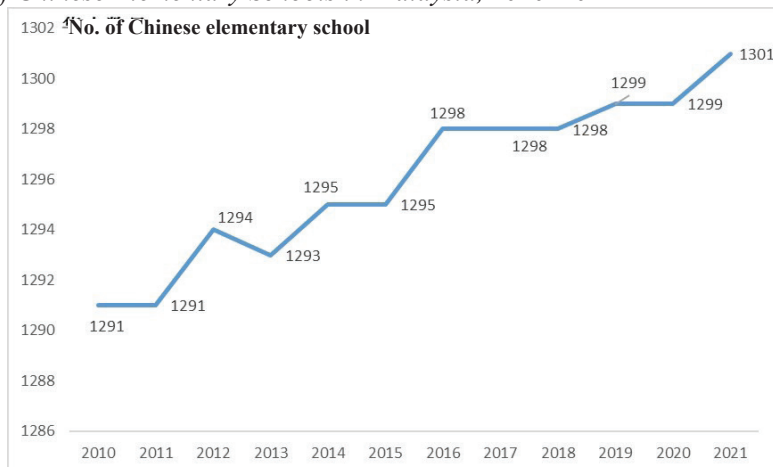
**Table 4***Differences in School Development Status among Rural and Urban Schools, 2021*

School Area Grouping		Average value	Standard deviation	Standard Error	F-value	Sig. (Two-tailed test)
School Development	Rural	3.97	0.54	0.04	9.387	0.002**
	City	4.14	0.52	0.04		
Faculty Development	Rural	4.05	0.54	0.04	0.383	0.536
	City	4.08	0.51	0.04		
Student Development	Rural	3.64	0.55	0.04	9.364	0.002**
	City	3.81	0.49	0.04		
Internal and external school relations	Rural	4.00	0.52	0.04	1.547	0.214
	City	4.07	0.51	0.04		

Note: \*\* indicates a significant difference at the 0.05 level.

### Student Enrolment

Through active efforts and advocacy over the years, the number of CESs has increased from 1,291 in 2010 to 1,301 in 2021 (Figure 1). Among them, 415 schools are categorised as “government or subsidized schools,” while the rest are known as “government-aided schools” (Table 5).<sup>4</sup> Government-aided schools are responsible for their basic expenses, including upgrading of infrastructure, the purchase of equipment, and payment of water and electricity bills. Their reliance on community support is heavy and attempts in development are frustrated by a severe lack of funding.

**Figure 1***The Number of Chinese Elementary Schools in Malaysia, 2010–2021*

Source: United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM), 2021.

**Table 5***Types of Chinese Elementary Schools in Malaysia by State, 2018*

State	City		Countryside		Total		Total
	Government Schools	Government Aided Schools	Government Schools	Government Aided Schools	Government Schools	Government Aided Schools	
Perak	19	34	55	77	74	111	185
Selangor	33	21	30	30	63	51	114
Pahang	16	8	34	17	50	25	75
Kelantan	5	5	1	4	6	9	15
Johor	33	41	56	86	89	127	216
Kedah	8	20	13	48	21	68	89
Malacca	4	13	21	27	25	40	65
Negeri Sembilan	11	19	24	28	35	47	82
Penang	4	52	5	29	9	81	90
Perlis	0	3	4	3	4	6	10
Terengganu	0	5	1	4	1	9	10
Sabah	1	31	1	50	2	81	83
Sarawak	11	62	18	129	29	191	220
Kuala Lumpur	7	35	0	0	7	35	42
Labuan	0	2	0	0	0	2	2
Putrajaya	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	152	351	263	532	415	883	1,298

Source: United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM): 2018 UCSTAM Report, 23 August 2019.

The declining birth rate of the Chinese has resulted in a downward trend in the enrollment of students in CESs (Table 6). This issue has become a fundamental problem in the development of CESc. Enrollment had declined from 603,192 in 2010 to 507,177 by 2021 or a decline of 96,015 students or 15.9% of the total.

**Table 6***Student Enrolment in Chinese Elementary Schools, 2010–2021*

State	2010	2014	2018	2021	Number of students	Percentage increase or decrease
Perak					-18,783	-31.27
Kedah	26,039	22,591	19,699	18,632	-7,407	-28.44
Terengganu	2,740	2,424	2,258	2,186	-554	-20.22
Pahang	21,916	19,821	17,929	17,136	-4,780	-21.81
Perlis	2,205	2,006	1,862	1,821	-384	-17.42
Negeri Sembilan	22,777	21,198	19,046	18,149	-4,628	-20.32
Kuala Lumpur	49,003	44,799	42,909	43,640	-5,363	-10.94
Penang	53,874	49,348	45,376	44,663	-9,211	-17.10
Melaka	19,482	18,002	16,480	15,875	-3,607	-18.51
Johor	110,454	101,907	94,334	90,471	-19,981	-18.10
Sarawak	70,374	65,798	61,382	60,412	-9,962	-14.16
Kelantan	6,321	5,951	5,410	5,383	-938	-14.84
Selangor	121,492	117,505	110,156	110,276	-11,216	-9.23
Sabah	35,202	35,320	34,523	35,827	625	+1.77
Labuan	1,240	1,381	1,442	1,414	174	+14.03
Total	603,192	559,157	517,097	507,177	-96,015	-15.92

Source: UCSTAM, 2021.

The falling trend of student enrollment in CESs is the outcome of various factors. A major reason is increased population mobility as the younger generation abandons employment-deficit small towns to work in the cities or to study in colleges and universities. Movements from the cities to the suburbs in turn creates intense demand which, given the political situation of the country, is not readily met. Students are then forced to enroll in non-Chinese schools. Additionally, the recent emergence of international and private schools is diverting students away from CESs which are either not available or not easily accessible. Consequently, there were 96 CESs with fewer than 30 students in 2021 and 16 have fewer than 10 students (Table 7). Survival of these schools has become an urgent issue as the prospects of closure become a reality (UCSTAM 2021).

This situation reflects a serious imbalance in the distribution of CESs and the Chinese population. The population is highly mobile but schools are not. But strict government policies and regulations on the establishment of new CESs or on relocation of existing ones hamper efforts to rectify what is actually practical issue.

**Table 7***Distribution of Chinese Elementary School by Size of Enrolment, 2014 and 2021*

Enrolment Size	2014	Percentage	2021	Percentage
0–30	103	8.0	96	7.4
31–50	89	6.9	137	10.5
51–100	234	18.2	226	17.4
101–150	132	10.3	151	11.6
151–500	377	29.4	359	27.6
501–1,000	194	15.1	188	14.5
1,001–2,000	113	8.8	110	8.5
2,001–3,000	32	2.5	27	2.1
3,000 and above	10	0.8	5	0.4
Total	1,284	100.0	1,299	100.0

Source: UCSTAM, 2021

The increase in the number of micro-CESs is a serious cause of concern. There were 610 mini-sized schools in 2021 compared with 540 in 2010. Given the high overhead cost of maintaining a school, the smaller the enrolment the greater the financial burden on the local Chinese community. Yet the community will not let any CES to go out of existence. The alternative then is to relocate the school to bigger towns and new housing areas where the demand for CESs is high. Even then, the issue of relocation of CESs is often fraught with problems that may take years to overcome.

### Curriculum Development

The curriculum of CESs is part of the national curriculum framework for all elementary schools in the country. This curriculum gives due recognition to accepted values such as patriotism, moral principles and civic awareness. The curriculum is subjected to reforms and amendments. There have been five such reforms since the 1980s (Table 8).

**Table 8***Evolution of Elementary School Curriculum in Malaysia, 1893–2017*

Year	Courses
1983	New Curriculum for Elementary Schools (Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah, KBSR)
1995	Integrated Elementary School Programme (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah, KBSR)
2003	Elementary School Comprehensive Curriculum Revised (KBSR Semakan)
2011	Elementary Standard Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah, KSSR)
2017	Revised Elementary Standard Curriculum (KSSR Semakan)

Source: United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM): Report of the Profile Survey on the Implementation of Primary Standard Curriculum (KSSR) in Chinese Primary Schools, 23 August 2019.

The Primary Standard Curriculum (KSSR) was implemented in 2011 to replace the Primary Integrated Curriculum (KBSR) which was introduced in 1995. The KSSR was revised in 2017 and implemented for Grade 1 and progressively to Grade 6 in 2022. A significant feature of the new curriculum is the emphasis on the development of higher-order thinking skills of students. The contents of higher-order thinking skills are mainly based on Bloom's taxonomy. This is a classification of cognitive objectives divided into six levels of knowledge: understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. These higher-order thinking skills are defined by the Ministry of Education as the ability to apply learned knowledge, skills, and values for reasoning and reflection, and to possess the ability to solve problems, make decisions, innovate, and create, and abbreviated as KBAT (Kemahiran Berfikir Aras Tinggi) in Malay (Guo, 2017).

KSSR is a curriculum and educational reform. Its primary purpose is to replace the "examination-oriented education" of KBSR and to encourage students' ability for self-directed learning. The effectiveness and issues regarding the implementation of the KSSR curriculum in Chinese, Malay, English, Mathematics, and Science subjects in CESc since 2011 have been summarised and analysed by the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM, 2019).

### **Subject Contents**

Despite the good intention of the KSSR curriculum, it has not always been able to satisfy the needs of schools, students or other stakeholders. The survey findings reveal that some subjects have overly complex contents that are beyond the learning abilities of most students. Both Chinese and Malay textbooks in the first grade contain an excessive number of new characters and vocabulary, and the grammar and writing skills requirements are too demanding. While the curriculum is rich in its contents, some texts are too lengthy for students to grasp the overall meaning, or they are disconnected from students' daily life experiences. The result is a lack of interest and understanding in language learning. In terms of mathematics and science subjects, approximately 60% of CESs reported that the mathematics contents in the first and sixth grades are too advanced, and those in grades four to six are lacking in coherence. Similarly, 56% of schools mentioned that the science contents in the first grade is too broad and difficult for students who are just beginning to explore science. In some ways, the KSSR curriculum is an improvement over that of the KBSR (Table 9).

**Table 9***Comparison of KSSR and KBSR Textbook in Malaysian Elementary Schools*

	KSSR	KBSR
Overall view	Vivid, interesting and diverse	More dull and monotonous
Language Subjects	More literacy, less writing	Emphasis on grammar and writing skills
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are better at expressing and presenting ideas that</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students are better able to write complete and less sickly sentences.</li> </ul>
	Writing skills need to be strengthened	Weak expressive skills
Mathematical and scientific disciplines	Examples are brought to life, but too much emphasis is placed on higher-order thinking.	No emphasis on higher order thinking.
	Ignore the basic learning of mathematics	Students still quickly grasp the foundations of mathematics
Overall Reflection	Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, so we should take the best and discard the worst.	
	To lay the foundation for students to learn and improve their higher order thinking skills.	

Source: United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM): Report of the Profile Survey on the Implementation of Primary Standard Curriculum (KSSR) in Chinese Primary Schools, 23 August 2019.

**Teaching Practice**

More than half of the responding schools in the survey indicated that teachers used a combination of KSSR and KBSR teaching methods during classroom instruction, with 71% of them being sixth-grade subject teachers. The reasons behind this practice are that teachers do not fully grasp the teaching models and the assessment methods of KSSR. Although they are aware that KSSR emphasises on student-centred approaches, the new curriculum has increased activities and workload. The pressure to cope with the existing examination system has also interfered with the effective implementation of KSSR teaching models.

Teachers generally agree that the KSSR curriculum is more interesting, lively, and diverse compared to KBSR (Table 10). They are in favour of KSSR's teaching goals of enhancing students' higher-order thinking skills and are confident that the teaching requirements of KSSR are achievable. However, less than half of the teachers fully agree with the intended purpose of reducing rote learning. This is because of the need to undergo various types of examinations, especially the Elementary School Evaluation Test (UPSR) in the Sixth grade. Concerning the question of "better teaching effectiveness," the proportion of agreement is even lower. This survey confirmed that the education system has not been able to break free from the reality of an examination-oriented approach. While KSSR's teaching goals differ from the examination-oriented KBSR, as long as mandatory examinations continue, it will be difficult for teachers to change their old teaching methods which are still better suited to prepare students to perform in various examinations.

**Table 10***Teachers' Opinions on the Influence of KSSR on Learning*

Subjects	KSSR More interesting, lively and diversified	KSSR Reduce rote learning	KSSR Improve students' higher-order thinking	KSSR Better teaching results
Chinese Language	76%–84%	41%–49%	73%–80%	13%–17%
Malay10ian	73%–76%	30%–42%	67%–72%	15%–17%
English	74%–83%	35%–41%	62%–68%	20%–22%
Science	70%–75%	37%–40%	68%–73%	15%–21%
Mathematics	57%–73%	37%–41%	70%–75%	9%–15%

Source: UCSTAM, 2019.

### Teaching Evaluation

KSSR's teaching evaluation is based on the School-based Assessment known as "Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah". Schools and teachers generally believe school-based assessment is a more comprehensive evaluation of students' abilities. However, there are two main challenges in its implementation:

- Teachers' grasp of the evaluation methods: Teachers encounter problems in understanding and execution of the school-based assessment. The survey findings indicate that only 18% to 27% of teachers understand the evaluation methods for specific subjects, while 63% to 69% are still trying to adapt to the operation of school-based assessment. Another 7% to 13% of teachers have yet to fully master the assessment methods.
- The gap between ideals and reality: The original intention of school-based assessment was to minimise the influence of examinations on teaching, to enhance teaching quality, and to practise personalised education. Again, the current system is still tied to the needs of examinations, and students' upward promotion is still determined by UPSR scores. Furthermore, examination scores remain as a major criterion in the Ministry's school evaluation and assessment of teaching quality. This practice goes against the stated purpose of school-based assessment. As not all teachers have fully mastered the school-based assessment method, some schools believe that UPSR is the best way to evaluate students' learning outcomes. In summary, the well-intentioned school-based assessment is hindered by the lack of thorough planning and implementation by the Ministry of Education. Overall, school-based assessment has increased the administrative workload for teachers, affected the smoothness of teaching, and led to doubts and a loss of confidence in the new assessment method.

The positive effects of the curriculum reform of KSSR are seen in terms of the diversified and engaging contents, enhancement of higher-order thinking skills, and a comprehensive teaching evaluation method. But problems involved in implementing KSSR have not permitted its ideals and goals to be fully realised. More efforts are needed to raise the quality of education, to minimise the examination-driven mentality, and to co-ordinate the work of educational institutions at all levels. In short, the effective implementation of the new curriculum requires efficient administration of schools, effective teaching practices among teachers, and stimulating and autonomous learning for students.

In addition to practising the new curriculum, CESs have to contend with the 2010 policy of “Strengthening the Malay Language, Enhancing the English Language” (Dasar Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris, MBMMBI) in place of the aborted “English for Mathematics and Science” directive. While the teaching of mathematics and science reverted to the mother tongue, it was done concurrently with “Strengthening the Malay Language, Enhancing the English Language” policy, which began progressively in 2010. The Ministry of Education launched a Dual Language Programme (DLP) in 300 national elementary and secondary schools in 2016 as an experimental programme involving mathematics and science. Participating schools had the option to teach subjects such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Design and Technology in English.

The concern of CESs is that the teaching of mathematics and science in English or the DLP will reduce the total instructional hours in the Chinese language. In the UPSR assessment, the only subjects in which Chinese is used will be comprehension and essay. Other subjects such as Malay, English, mathematics, and science, will be assessed and answered in languages other than Chinese. The fear is that these features would alter the character of CESs and the essence of “mother-tongue” education (Lian, 2020). From 300 participating schools, the number has increased to 379 involving 39,474 students in Year 1 and Year 4 of primary schools, as well as Year 1 of secondary schools. However, the programme has not attracted the participation of all but one CESs (UCSCAM, 2020). The change in the government from March 2020 has yet again led to modifications to the “Strengthening the Malay Language, Enhancing the English Language” policy. On the other hand, CESs will continue to monitor the situation to safeguard their interests.

### **Reforms in the Mode of Evaluation**

The Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced the school-based assessment (PBS) as a mode of teaching evaluation in 2011. One of the objectives was to reduce rote learning and to promote higher-order thinking skills. In 2016, the assessment of Year 6 students combined the centralised assessment examination and school-based assessment in a 60:40 ratio. In 2018, examinations for

Grades 1 to 3 were replaced with classroom-based assessments. The reason was Grades 1 to 3 are a critical period of a child's growth in which character cultivation should be emphasised over test results (Malaysiakini, 2018) The changes involve reforms of a qualitative and quantitative nature (Guo, 2017).

The new examination format emphasises constructed response items, particularly in the language comprehension paper. Students are required to provide clear and relevant answers based on rational thinking rather than making guesses. It also tests skills in the written expression in language as an outcome of higher-order learning in terms of students' ability to express their own insights and demonstrate their writing skills. The examination format also integrates subjective and objective questions to achieve a more comprehensive and effective assessment of learning outcomes and to improve the reliability and validity of the examination (Table 11).

Reform of a quantitative nature includes allowing students sufficient time to answer questions in all the papers. Another change is the addition of a paper in the language subject and the science subject to increase the number of scores from 6 to 8. As for the types of questions, the language subject reduces the number of objective multiple-choice questions and adopts a mixture of objective and subjective questions to better assess students' higher-order learning outcomes.

In effect, a change in the examination format of the language paper was to move away from objective questions to a combination of objective and constructive model formats. While objective questions may have higher reliability and validity in evaluation, they may not effectively assess higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creativity. On the other hand, constructed-response questions have the potential to assess what objective questions cannot, but they are subject to higher scoring errors and limited sampling, which may affect the reliability and validity of the assessment. Hence, in the attempt to improve the format of the examinations of elementary schools, it is mandatory that the Ministry of Education must ensure that a high element of fairness and reliability is maintained.

The objective of the new evaluation method is to promote students' holistic development by means of diverse teaching methods and classroom assessments. This education reform is to eventually abolish the examination system by 2021. In this process, there is a need to find solutions to the following challenges.

The first is to convince traditional-minded teachers and parents the need to abolish examination-oriented education. School-based assessment and student-centered teaching demand that teachers be innovative and willing to adopt different teaching methods and intensify teacher-student interaction. Teachers will have to spend more time on instructional design. A UCSTAM survey confirms that school-based assessment will significantly increase teachers' workload in administration and documentation will interfere with teaching performance. The third concerns the upgrading of evaluation skills of teachers and classroom assessment techniques following the

**Table 11**

*Comparative Analysis of Format between New and Old Examination Papers for Primary Year 6 Assessment*

Old format (from 2005)			New format (starting 2016)						
Language subjects: Chinese, Malay, English, Tamil									
Projects	Test Paper 1: Understanding	Paper 2: Writing			Test Paper 1: Understanding		Paper 2: Writing		
Type of quiz	Objective test	Subjective tests			Objective test Subjective tests		Subjective tests		
Question Type	Multiple Choice Questions	Restricted Constructive Test Questions Constructive test questions			Multiple Choice Questions Multiple Choice Questions Restricted Constructive Test Questions		Constructive test questions		
Number of questions	40 questions	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group A	Group B	Group A	Group B	Group C
		1 question	1 question	Choose 1 of 3	20 questions	5 questions	1 question	1 question	Choose 1 of 2
		10	20	30	20	30	10	15	25
Total Score	40	60			50		50		
Examination time limit	50 minutes	1 hour and 15 minutes			1 hour and 15 minutes		1 hour and 15 minutes		
Mathematics									
Projects	Test paper 1	Test Paper 2			Test paper 1		Test Paper 2		
Type of quiz	Objective test	Subjective tests			Objective test		Subjective tests		
Question Type	Multiple Choice Questions	Restricted Constructive Test Questions			Multiple Choice Questions		Restricted Constructive Test Questions		
Number of questions	40 questions	20 questions			40 questions		15 questions		
Total Score	40	40			40		60		
Examination time limit	1 hour	40 minutes			1 hour		1 hour		
Science									
Projects	Single Test Papers				Test paper 1		Test Paper 2		
Type of quiz	Objective test				Objective test		Objective test Subjective tests		
Question Type	Multiple Choice Questions (Group A) Restricted Constructive Test Questions (Group B)				Multiple Choice Questions		Multiple Choice Questions Restricted Constructive Test Questions		
Number of questions	30 questions (Group A)	5 questions (Group B)			40 questions		8 questions		
Total Score	30	20			40		40		
Examination time limit	1 hour and 15 minutes				1 hour		1 hour		

Source: Guo, 2017, p. 22

abolition of the centralised Grade 6 assessment examination. This will imply the need to provide training courses in teaching and assessment to upgrade the professional competence of teachers.

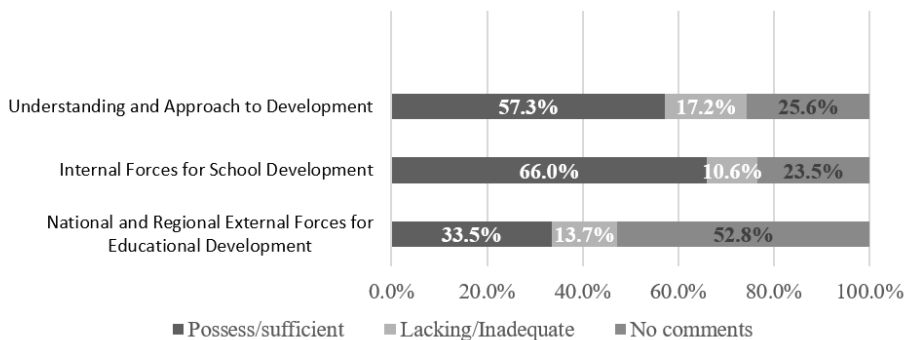
### Prospects for Sustainable Development

The future of CESs depends on the concept of sustainable development. A total of 272 principals in the sample expressed their specific opinions on the development of CESs. Their thoughts reveal many insights on the complexity of management of education in the multiethnic context of Malaysia.

A quarter of the principals have no idea of the future development of their schools. A similar proportion has no real understanding of the internal forces that may affect the future of their schools, while another 52.8% have no confidence in external forces that determine future development such as the availability of community support (Figure 2). There is then a substantial number of administrators who are unsure of the future of their schools many of which are indeed facing a shortage of resources for development.

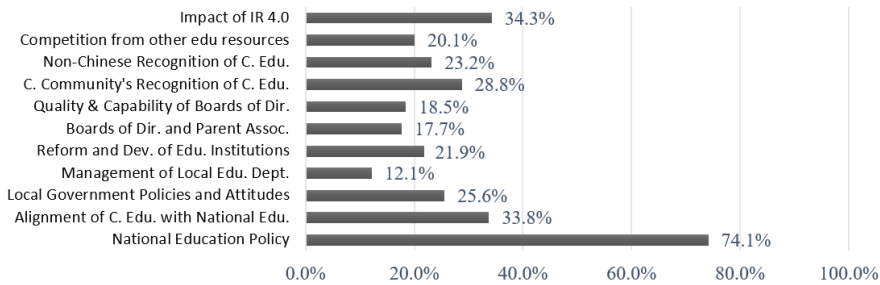
**Figure 2**

*Development Conditions of Chinese Elementary Schools, 2021*



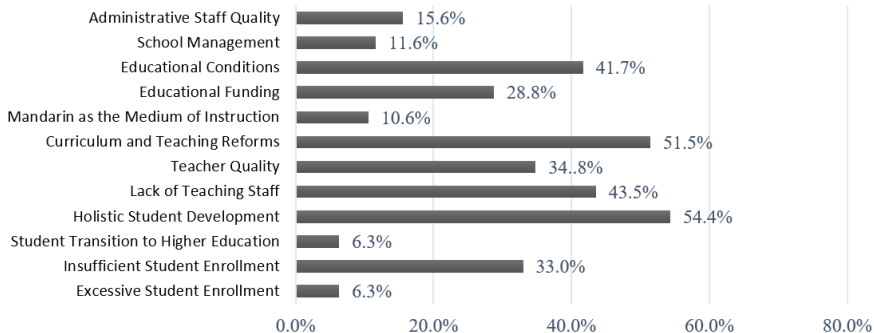
Source: as Table 1

The future of CESs is based on their status as an integral component of the national education system. To secure this future, CESs have to cope with and adapt their operation to the technological trends of IR.4, and the ability to navigate complex situations originating from these trends. The gap between the “National Education Policy” and other issues is more than 40%, indicating that the national education policy, which has long been a challenge to the development of Chinese education in Malaysia, remains the biggest obstacle to the growth of Chinese schools (Figure 3).

**Figure 3***Primary Internal Issues in the Development of Chinese Elementary Schools, 2021*

Source: as Table 1

On the internal issues affecting future development, the holistic student development, curriculum and teaching reforms, and a lack of teaching resources are the main internal issues facing the development of CESs (Figure 4). Holistic student development is closely related to curriculum and teaching reforms as well as the availability of qualified teachers. This also supports the need to strengthen curriculum development and address the less-than-ideal situation in student development within the current development context.

**Figure 4***Opinions on the Primary External Issues affecting the Development of Chinese Elementary Schools, 2021*

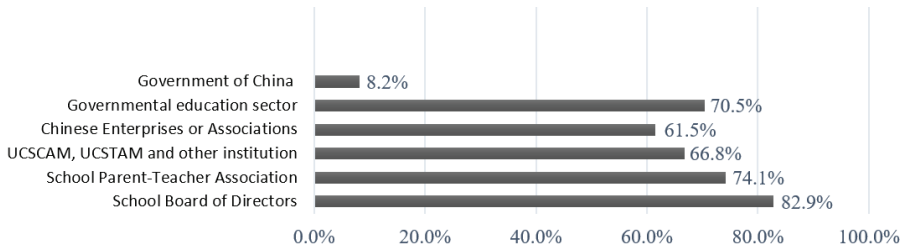
Source: as Table 1

In promoting the development of CESs, the school boards as the decision-makers, and parent-teacher associations as collaborators will continue to play important roles. Government education departments and Chinese educational institutions will continue to have a crucial impact on education policies and practices. Additionally, the support, particularly in terms of financial assistance, from Chinese enterprise and community organisations is also highly significant. It is evident that the development of CESs and consequently their direction and future prospects will continue to be

driven by the Malaysian government, the Chinese community, school boards, and parent-teacher associations (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Stakeholder in the Development of Chinese Primary Schools, 2021*

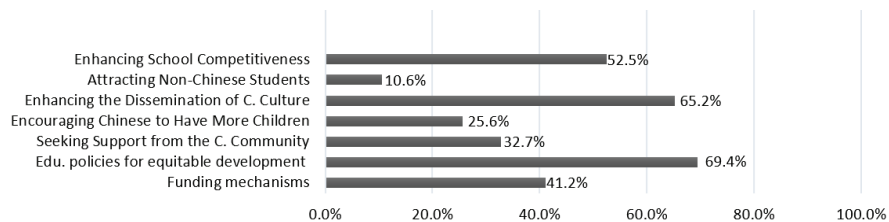


Source: as Table 1

The most widely supported development approach advocated by the school principals includes the demand for equitable education policies, strengthening the dissemination of Chinese culture, and enhancing school competitiveness. Despite the increase in the enrollment of non-Chinese students and the declining number of Chinese students, measures to attract non-Chinese students have gained the support of only a tenth of principals (Figure 6). The main concern stems from the worry that the distinctive “character” of CESs may be altered (Yang, 2020).

**Figure 6**

*Development Measures for Chinese Elementary Schools, 2021*



Source: as Table 1

Overall, the survey of school principals have yielded some valuable insights on the issues concerning the development and the future of CESs. These views may be grouped into four categories:

- The overall opinion is that education should be “depoliticised” to focus on education itself. The government should adopt fair and just educational policies towards minority language education, such as addressing the shortage of teachers and insufficient funding in CESs and

eliminating the distinction between fully subsidised and partially subsidised schools. <sup>ii4</sup>

- Chinese education serves as an anchor by which the roots of Chinese culture are preserved and transmitted. Efforts to ensure the existence of Chinese education are the mission and responsibility of the community. Hence the community, together with the schools, school boards of directors, parent-teacher associations, and alumni are key elements in the efforts to sustain Chinese schools.
- To cope with rapidly changing demands of society, Chinese education has to keep pace with the times, to redefine their role, and to carry out essential reforms. This will involve adaptation to new educational and teaching models, improve the quality of teachers, inculcate diverse educational skills, and intensify talent development to encourage the holistic development of students.
- The declining birth rate among the Chinese have long-term consequences on the future of Chinese education. The declining supply of students in rural schools and increased enrollment in urban schools have created serious imbalances of supply and demand of students in the villages and large towns. Coupled with these problems are the shortage of teachers, funding, facilities, and overall infrastructure development.

### Conclusion

The development of Chinese education is placed on a sustainable footing on the basis of the relatively progressive national education policies, the acceptance of Chinese education by the non-Chinese, and the current level of quality and scale of the schools.

In multi-ethnic Malaysia, the existence of mother-tongue education entails more than preserving ethnic languages and cultures. It calls for accommodation of the diverse expectations of society while meeting the demands for quality education. New challenges include the integration of non-Chinese students, declining enrollment, maintaining quality, and ensuring prospects for constant advancement.

The growing practical value of the Chinese language and the enrollment of non-Chinese students present a valuable opportunity to cushion the impact of declining Chinese students in many schools. This development is an indication that Chinese schools are open to all students and not only to the Chinese. Chinese language is taught as a first-language to native Chinese speakers. The increasing number of non-Chinese students may justify a need to teach the language as a second language to cater to the pedagogical needs of non-native speakers. The language may then be taught according to a more scientific and professional approach and to demonstrate the value of CESs as a channel of quality education. It is necessary to come to terms with reality that admitting non-Chinese students is an emerging trend among Malaysian students. The bottom line is that changes in the teaching

mode should not jeopardise the status and character of CESs Chinese in the country.

Cultural identity and preservation may go hand in hand with the integration of Chinese schools into the national education system. Meanwhile, the emphasis on quality requires a shift away from the traditional orientation on examinations and innovative attempts in upgrading curriculum design, teaching methods, and teacher training. The pursuit of excellence in education cannot be divorced from the committed support of society.

A key feature in the operation of CESs is that “Chinese schools are run and managed by the Chinese.” While keeping the pivotal role of school boards and parent-teacher associations, harnessing the strengths of Chinese educational institutions, businesses, and community organisations and the political, economic, and cultural forces of non-Chinese groups is an effective way to leverage the social resources of all communities for the benefit of Chinese schools. These collective efforts will foster a co-operative and mutually beneficial relationship within the framework of building Chinese schools together as a nation.

Steering the development of CESs to accommodate and adapt to changes of the times, and actively contributing to inter-ethnic understanding and fulfilling their role in national development, are a sure way to steer the development of CESs on a sustainable basis.

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### Notes

- 1 The Board of Directors is responsible for the establishment, management, and operation of CESs. They advocate and fight for the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese elementary schools, as well as oversee the development and management of the schools. They also address various issues faced by the schools, particularly related to school funding. Parent-Teacher Associations, composed of teachers and parents, primarily serve the students' development and well-being, and assist in improving the school's educational standards.
- 2 Data compiled from the official websites of the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM or Dong Zong) and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM or Jiao Zong).
- 3 The literature on Malaysian Chinese education is rather extensive. Recent studies on the development of Chinese education and related issues are those by Hong, 2008; Mo, 2017; Ang, 2015; and Ke, 2020; works on the relationship between Chinese education and ethnicity, politics, culture, and nation building were studied by Hu, 2012; Wang, 2010; and Samuel et al., 2017; and special investigations of Chinese schools were completed by Lee, 2011; Qian, 2018; and Lin, 2019; while those on the curriculum, instruction, teaching materials, teaching staff, and student-related were undertaken by Ye, 2012; Yu et al., 2017.

Studies on the contestations between Chinese education and official policies with the ultimate objective of implementing Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) or national language as the sole medium of instruction in education include those by Hu, 2012; Huang, 2012; and Ke, 2020; and Ye (2001) was concerned with challenges arising from diverse demands and the knowledge-based economy. The factors that determine the survival of CESs were discussed by Qian (2018), and Guo and Hong (2017) examined issues of teaching and administration arising from increasing ethnic diversity of CESs.

Despite the increasing attention on aspects of the development and transformation of CESs, there is a lack of empirical analysis to provide an accurate picture of the broad situation (Zhang, 2020; Jiang & Liu, 2019).

- 4 There are currently 415 fully subsidised CESs in the country and which receive complete financial support from the government. Additionally, there are 886 partially subsidised CES that receive partial financial support from the government.

These partially subsidised schools are responsible for their own funding for infrastructure expansion, acquisition of software facilities, utility expenses, and face significant financial constraints, resulting in a highly challenging development situation.