

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ELDERLY IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL NATIONAL LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

Pitchayada Mekhirunsiri*¹ & Mala Rajo Sathian**²

*First author, **Corresponding author

^{1,2}Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

¹Department of Eastern Language, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok, Thailand

(Pitchayada.M@chula.ac.th, malarajo@um.edu.my)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.vol29no2.6>

Abstract

By 2030, Malaysia will become an 'aging society' according to the World Bank's criteria. The government bears the responsibility of effectively managing the demographic changes. This paper analyses how elderly characters are portrayed in Malaysian primary school national language textbooks (*Buku Teks Bahasa Melayu Sekolah Kebangsaan*, years 1-6) and compares them to the aims set forth in the 2011 'Malaysian Five Dimensions Framework of National Policy for Older Persons'. The findings reveal that elderly individuals are often depicted as non-contributing, weak, ill, or chronically dependent, thus perpetuating stereotypes and biases. This leads to children absorbing and acknowledging these biases without critically examining them. Textbook writers should implant more realistic and helpful representations of the aged among children as they begin their own journeys into adulthood and old age. Elderly misrepresentations limit social awareness of ageing and reduce empathy and interest in finding solutions for their problems.

Keywords: elderly, Malaysia, Buku Teks Bahasa Melayu, representations, five dimensions framework

INTRODUCTION

As with many countries, Malaysian demographics has changed over time: by 2030 Malaysia will become what is defined as an 'aging society', based on the World Bank's definition (Nor Ain Mohamed Radhi & Tharanya Arumugam, 2019). These changes affect everyone in the society, directly and indirectly. However, the

government bears the bulk of the responsibilities for preparing the country to face aging population effectively. School textbooks in general, are vital tools for educating the public on government and other relevant agencies' policies towards the elderly. The textbooks form part of mandatory learning for all throughout the country's most recent history, and they are "one of the ways which represents the type of nation that is projected by the state" (Lim, 2009, p. 272).

Textbooks are considered academic documents. They are also the main teaching tool for teachers and schools in most countries. To achieve its educational goals, governments produce textbooks that 'instruct' children, and by extension the adults they will become, to behave appropriately and allow themselves to be moulded into the government's ideal citizens.

The Malaysian institution responsible for education is the Ministry of Education (MoE) (*Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*). The Malaysian national language textbooks were created following the guidelines set forth in the standard-based curriculum (KSSR) and the National Education Philosophy. The MoE appoints committees to interpret their guidelines and appoint educational professionals who do the actual writing. Their product is passed back to the Ministry of Education, which certifies that they have been written in accordance with its policies and attaches its finalising official seal of approval. Then, they are permitted to be distributed and used in schools throughout the nation.

As Van Dijk (1987) pointed out, "all knowledge in the textbook is the truth and...is reliable", thus people who use the textbooks tend to believe them to be correct, proper, factual and trustworthy. Textbooks have a weighty moral obligation in that they should be free from biased content that can transmit detrimental ideas to children and the society to which they will soon contribute.

Literature Review

In Malaysia, several scholars have studied government policies focusing on the elderly (Ong, 2002; Tengku Aizan Hamid & Nurizan Yahaya, 2008; Chang et al., 2020). Most of the literature discusses the elderly in regard to their financial, mental and physical health problems, as well as the quality of their lives following retirement (Tan S L et al., 2016; Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin et al., 2019; Zulazhar Tahir et al., 2019). These studies found that while policies do exist to support the aging population, they are generally insufficient or incomplete. Furthermore, there is a lack of public awareness regarding these support systems. As the elderly population is on the rise, it is imperative that the government enhances its support for the elderly in Malaysia, especially in Sabah and Sarawak (Chang et al., 2020).

Thus, when trying to anticipate the future course of policies and services aimed at the elderly population in Malaysia, it is worthwhile to start by examining the factors that influence and enhance their quality of life. In exploring more creative approaches to eldercare, one must also recognise the untapped potential of the elderly to contribute to their own development. Research suggests some broad recommendations for improvements such as: gathering census-type information, implementing government intervention at the macro level, strengthening social security measures, ensuring access to comprehensive healthcare, enhancing training for eldercare personnel, developing healthcare financing strategies, providing education and retraining opportunities for older individuals, creating innovative employment options for the elderly, addressing housing, environmental, and town planning considerations, and preventing the duplication of services (Ong, 2002).

It has been recommended that to ensure sufficient financial support for the elderly, improvements to the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) system should be made. Concepts that have been floated include expanding coverage; increasing the number of social security system employees; increasing payment standards through providing greater benefits which will attract more participants; increasing the fund's value by improving asset management; and raising public awareness about the challenges and social responsibilities associated with an aging society (Tan et al., 2016).

However, studies about the government policy's influence and guidance on the kinds of elderly representations allowed in primary school national language textbooks are rare. This paper draws its observations from representational analysis of the first six years of *Buku Teks Bahasa Melayu Sekolah Kebangsaan* (BTBM). It compares the representations of elderly characters in these textbooks to the aims set forth in the 2011 'Malaysian Five Dimensions Framework of National Policy for Older Persons' (M5DF for NPOP).

How are the elderly represented in the textbooks? The textbook writers, and the government that employs and guides them, want the young readers to believe in the invented elderly characters used, in the roles within family and society that they are imputed to have, and in the physical ability and mental capacity that they are typically assumed to possess. The contents could be more closely aligned with and take into consideration the 2011 M5DF.

METHODOLOGY

This paper incorporates the following two interpretations of representation as a guide to examining portrayals of the elderly in the BTBM. O' Shaughnessy and

Stadler (2005) interpret representation 'to look like, or to resemble, or to stand in for something, or someone' and then to be presented 'a second time (or to be) re-presented'. Stuart Hall conceives of it as a simulated image of something which is presented via literary works or other cultural inventions. It is a selected reality based on specific beliefs or values which can create some attributes. Multiple details in one representation can convey certain social and cultural meanings and values. The first phase of its formation occurs in one's mind and involves the internal process of distilling and interpreting truth as knowledge. The second phase consists of transmitting it externally via a signal system like language. Meaning is created via this two-phase moderating process by writers who employ it (Hall, 1997). The representations in textbooks using language and images conveys and transmits meaning to young people who are exposed to them through teachers and classroom learning. In this sense, the analysis for the present paper is largely based on the interpretations of Hall's idea of representation.

ANALYSIS

In this section, representations of the elderly contained in Malaysian national language textbooks will be analysed through critical readings of the contents and compared with the stipulations of the 2011 M5DF, since this policy conveys the government's goals regarding the elderly. This policy focuses on ensuring the well-being, dignity, and rights of the elderly. It aims to create an age-friendly environment, promote active aging, and improve healthcare access. By representing the elderly in language textbooks in line with this policy, it will help portray them in various dimensions within society—not just as weak and sick individuals confined to their homes.

The scope of the present study is limited to the six Malaysian national language textbooks based on the standard-based curriculum (KSSR) as listed below. They are known as *Buku Teks Bahasa Malaysia Sekolah Kebangsaan*, which we have shortened to BM 1-6. Publication dates of this series are as follows: BM 2 and 3 were published in 2013; BM 5 and 6 were published in 2015; BM 1 and 4 were published in 2016.

Representations of the elderly in Malaysian national language textbook

The table below details the kind of representations of the elderly included in each textbook. We categorised them as related to family, teaching, health, special roles, and assistance needed.

Table 1: Representations of Elderly Expertise/Infirmity per BM Levels

Category	BM 1	BM 2	BM 3	BM 4	BM 5
Family	Participating in family activities	Participate in meal preparation	Receive respect from younger generations (e.g., bowing in respect)	Family members bring fruit tiffin	Attend family convocations
Teaching	Instruct household duties and guide academic studies	Teach children about good nutrition	Educating younger generations on traditional games and moral values	Provide knowledge on traditional houses and the use of a betel box	Teach how to prepare traditional Malay desserts and gardening practices
Health	Appear older, representing an era of older technology	Often depicted with a bent back, slow walk, use of walking sticks, and wrinkled face	Carry walking sticks; need help on public transport	A male elder remains healthy due to his past <i>Silat</i> practice; a female elder acknowledges her frailty and acquires a wheelchair	Depicted with a bent back and wrinkles
Special Roles	Often innovators, particularly in agriculture	Receive assistance in gardening chores from family members	Some elderly individuals reside in homes for seniors and receive charitable donations	A male elder continues to work as a businessman and stay informed about modern banking technology	A disabled male elder attend the Malaysian National Day celebration annually
Assistance Received	Assisted by the younger	Receive assistance	Help is provided by	Government assistance is	Family members

Category	BM 1	BM 2	BM 3	BM 4	BM 5
	generation with tasks (e.g., home repairs)	from family members (e.g., with wheelchairs)	others, particularly on public transport	provided during natural disasters (e.g., floods)	plan to visit an ailing female elder who lives alone in a rural area

The table above presents the key themes surrounding representations of the elderly in the national language textbooks, observed across levels 1 to 5 of the BTBM. Notably, BM 6 contains no references to the elderly. The following section will elaborate on the M5DF and compare how the representations in the textbooks align with this framework.

The 2011 Malaysian Five Dimensions Framework policy for older persons

The Malaysian Cabinet approved the NPOP on January 5, 2011. It is administered by the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development (MWFCD). It does not supplant but works in conjunction with the previous 2008 National Health Policy for Older Persons (NHPOP), which was administered by the Ministry of Health (MOH). These policies converge on the stated aim of empowering individuals, families, and communities, with better services for the elderly. As well it tries to create better environments in which the elderly can improve their well-being (Tengku Aizan Hamid, 2019). The policy intends (1) to enhance the respect and self-worth of the elderly within family, society and nation, (2) to develop their potential so that they can remain active and productive and live independently, and (3) to encourage the provision of specific facilities that will ensure their care and protection. The 2011 NPOP provides a five-dimensional framework which defines the well-being of the elderly in terms of their health ('Healthy Ageing'), their social lives ('Active Ageing'), their spiritual lives ('Positive Ageing'), their environment ('Supportive Ageing') and their relationship to the economy ('Productive Ageing').

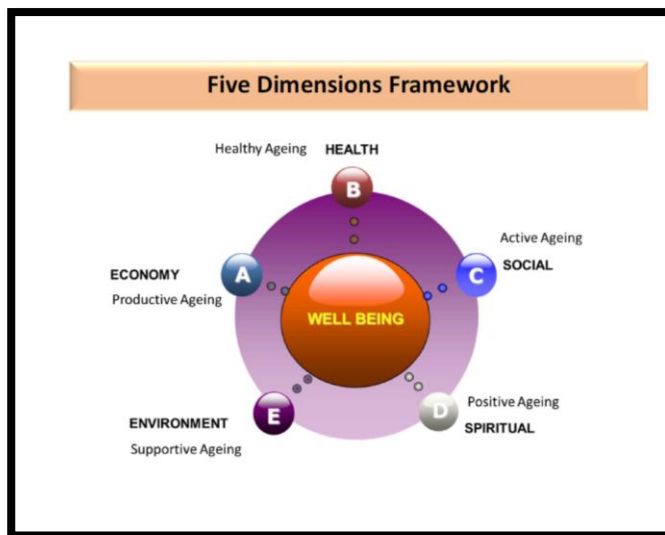


Figure 1: Five Dimensions Framework from Malaysian National Policies on the Elderly
(Source: Tengku Aizan Hamid [2019])

From our analysis of BTBM, we can see that representations of the elderly both fulfil in some respects but fall short in others, the stated goals of the 2011 M5DF. Particularly absent were representations of healthy, active, supportive, and productive ageing. The absence is rather glaring considering that the 2011 M5DF was made official at least two years prior to the publication dates of some of the textbooks (i.e. 2013). BTBM publishing years were 2013, 2015, and 2016.

The elderly are assumed to be weak or ill

Representations of the elderly as weak, ill, and in need of constant care from the younger generations of family and society were constantly found in these textbooks. This point is portrayed in a conversation between a grandmother and her grandchild.

Amirul: Kasihan nenek. Mari saya bantu nenek, ya.

Nenek: Terima kasih, Amirul. Nenek sudah tua dan tidak larat lagi untuk bergerak pantas.

Amirul: Nenek, ayah ada membelikan kerusi roda untuk nenek. Lihat gambar ini; akan saya bacakan risalah tentang kerusi roda itu, ya...

(BM 4 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2016], p. 180)

Amirul: Poor grandma. Let me help you.

Grandmother: Thank you, Amirul. I'm old and I can't move so fast anymore.

Amirul: Grandma, dad has bought you a wheelchair. Look at this photo while I read the instructions to you, okay?

(BM 4 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2016], p. 180, translated)

It is seen clearly that this character consensually admitted her infirmities (old age, reduced potential, and physical weakness), using words and phrases like 'tua' – old, and 'tidak larat lagi untuk bergerak pantas' - can't move fast. In addition, the words 'membantu' – to help, 'simpati' - sympathy, 'kasihan' - pity are used in this unit to indicate the standard emotional reactions of normal people to the frail and feeble elderly. The wheelchair story confirms the perception the writers want to have prevail about the chronic debilitation and restricted health used to represent the disabled and the elderly.



Figure 2: Grandson guides his grandmother while explaining to her about the wheelchair

(Source: BM 4 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2016], p. 180.)

This image illustrates an old lady being helped by a younger male. The grandmother carries a cane while her grandson holds her arm. The existence of the wheelchair helps emphasise her condition and her weakened physical condition. While the moral values contained in this picture and story are admirable, for it promotes caring for the elderly, the constant image of the elderly needing and

incapable tends to over emphasise and embed their vulnerability in the minds of young people.

The elderly as dependents

The next example leads readers of the textbooks to infer that older people have physical statuses which make them dependent on others when they wish to perform certain actions. Words indicating the need for younger people to support them are incorporated in this representation, such as *menolong* – help, and *memimpin tangan nenek* – holding grandmother's hands (BM 2 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz & Marina Binti Mat Isa, 2013], p. 43).



Figure 3: A boy helps the elderly to cross the road

(Source: BM 2 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz & Marina Binti Mat Isa, 2013], p. 43).)

Two more examples used the same words: *membantu*, *menolong* – to help, *minta* – to ask, and the adjective *selalu* – always, to emphasise the frequency of the action of helping (BM 2 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz & Marina Binti Mat Isa, 2013], p. 84). We see this again in a conversation between two men about the frail elderly who need assistance from others. The descriptive words *kasihan nenek* - 'pity grandmother', begin a dialogue that illustrates this point (Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013, p. 58).

There is also a distinction to be made between the representations of female and male elderly. Females are always seen as weak and/or ill, while males are less frequently classified as such.

Textbook authors should ideally educate children from early on about their potential responsibilities when it comes to caring for elderly family members. A more proactive approach would be preferable: it could inform/ready young people about the coming challenges of an altered demographic in which the aged are predicted to become a larger percentage of the whole population and, many of them may become more commonly neglected/abandoned. Younger generations could be taught to assume more important roles in which they contribute more to the creation of better living conditions and hygiene for active aging of residential and home-bound elderly. They should also be furnished with better awareness of emergency medical techniques and be available more frequently to implement home medical tests and minor procedures. As well, they should be able to provide essential medications when circumstances require it, for example, during natural disasters, or contagions like Covid-19.

The elderly are ignored by their families

The theme of abandonment/neglect is recurrent throughout the BM series. One example is a story of a boy who writes a letter to a friend discussing his time at an elderly care centre. He writes that at the centre named, *Pusat Jagaan Orang-orang Tua Seri Kasih*, most of the elderly there have no family (*kebanyakan warga tua di situ tidak mempunyai keluarga*) (BM 4 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2016], p. 80), suggesting that the elderly may have been abandoned.

From figure 4, it can be interpreted that some of the elderly in Malaysian society have been neglected by their own families and have ended up in elderly care centres. They wait for visitors to come and smile happily after having received them.



Figure 4: People in the elderly care centre receive visitors and gifts
(Source: BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 64.)

Instead of highlighting that they are poor, pitiful, and abandoned by their families, they could have been represented in other ways. Textbook writers can explain about both home-based and community-care social support systems that have already been established for the elderly. This would educate young minds to view helping the elderly as a collective community obligation, rather than one borne of personal sympathy, or one borne out of the drastic conditions of actual abandonment and neglect.

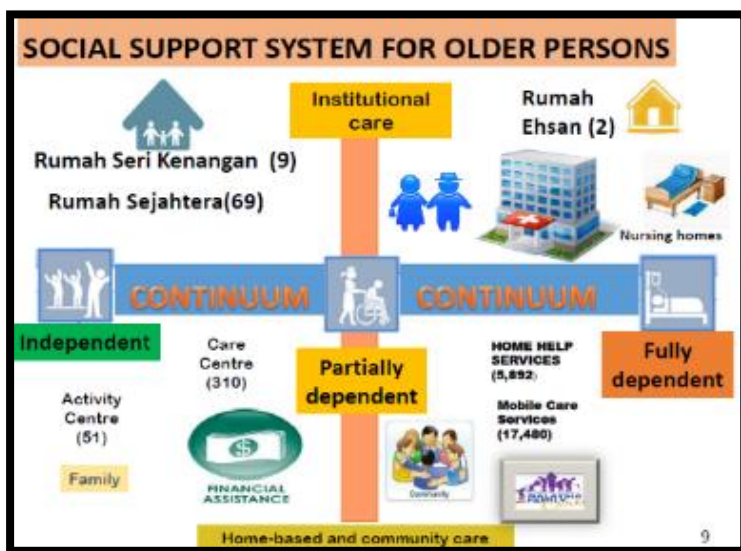


Figure 5: Social support systems for the elderly
(Source: Mohd Fazari Mohd Salleh [2017].)

The elderly are considered a low- tech generation

Women from different ages are also comparatively represented in the textbooks. In the image above, a younger woman who uses modern kitchen utensils and gas is seen on the left side, while on the right side is an older woman who uses old kitchen utensils and firewood for cooking. The text and illustrations portray the elderly as coming from a low technology generation.

The elderly in the BM series are often depicted as more likely to be performing common tasks manually/less efficiently. A father and son pair reveal some of this in an invented dialogue in which they discuss past farming practices by using the sentence *Datuk membajak bendang dengan menggunakan kerbau sahaja...* - 'Grandfather used to plough the land using buffaloes...' (BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 94).



Figure 6: The elderly are not adept at technology

(Source: BM 2 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz & Marina Binti Mat Isa, 2013], p. 43.)

These kinds of expression leads child-readers to infer that the aged usually do not use/learn/adapt to newer technologies. In another example the writer employed the words *inilah pengalaman pertamanya...*– ‘it was the first time...’, to indicate that an old woman has never been to the modern technologically equipped capital (BM 5 [Siti Sarah Binti Abdul Malek, 2015], p. 22). Illustrating it like this can cause readers to think that aged people are not accustomed to urban or modern ways of living.

However, the reality in this era is that technology is very accessible to many people including the elderly and rural population. Although statistics show them lagging in adaptation speed compared to other age groups, many have adapted and do possess their own smartphones and tablets. Textbook writers could update their portrayal of the elderly with new representations that reflect society’s and the government’s changing and developing policies and ideals.

In 2020, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) found that 11% of the population did not use the internet and about 50% of these non-users were the elderly (Statistics, 2020). As a result, the government decided to establish close to 140 senior citizens community centers nationwide that catered to senior citizen’s needs. In keeping with the *Keluarga Malaysia* (‘Malaysian Family’) ideal, these centers attempted to expand digital access and digital literacy to every parliamentary constituency in the country. At these centers, the elderly can access/learn to adopt the new technologies via adult education and adjunct training. One facet of these initiatives was the University of the Third Age (U3A) senior technology workshops, as well as other training opportunities (developed

in 2007) (“University of the Third Age Malaysia”, 2023). The overall intention was to improve the well-being of the Malaysian elderly by allowing them better access to information and to their own social networks. They are also taught how to avoid predatory online financial scams, how to discern misinformation, and the practical aspects of how to order goods and necessities over the internet (Ibrahim et al., 2016).

There is much hope that the newer 2024 iteration of Malaysia Madani policies will be able to modernise further, since they emphasise the importance of technology being crucial to the nation's progress, and their stated intent is to drive economic development, improve public services, and enhance digital literacy across the population (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2024, Malaysia Madani: Driving technological advancement, Government of Malaysia).

It can be beneficial if Malaysian children have an increased awareness of this different perspective on elderly use and adaptation of technology through their textbooks. It would be a much more elderly-enabling perspective. It would also serve as a reminder of the potential pitfalls of digitally illiterate elderly falling prey to financial and online scams, which can have catastrophic effects for their families, for example. A more positive vision of their capabilities may engender the concept of a potentially brighter future and use for the elderly, in school-children's imaginations. Yet the current textbooks seem to discourage children, and the adults that they will become, from thinking that the elderly can be much more than a burden to their families and to society in general.

Healthy ageing, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is embodied in various aspects. These include continuous learning; independent decision-making; personal mobility; having sustainable relationships; and being able to contribute to society. Since the whole world during the Covid-19 epidemic made a fundamental shift towards digitisation and making remote-access a much greater portion of everyone's lives, the more movement-restricted elderly especially can benefit. However, they need to be able to engage in these changes, concerning services such as online banking, online shopping, requesting transportation, and remote healthcare. Online support that understands the complexities that the elderly face is also critical (“Making digital technologies”, 2023).

Currently the digital gap between older and younger generations is obvious. Malaysia has instituted several programs to try and bridge it, including the National Digital Economy (NDE) and the 4th Industrial Revolution Council (introduced on July 1, 2021, after the break-out of the COVID-19 pandemic) (“National 4IR Policy”, 2021). Nonetheless, education and support for the elderly is relatively lacking in terms of helping them learn the required skills to fully use

digital technology and meet their daily needs. The demographic facts speak for themselves: The MCMC in its Internet Users Survey 2020 reported that 11.3 % of Malaysians were digitally illiterate, 51.8 % of this subset were aged 60 and above (Ayamany, 2021).

The Elderly Are More Commonly Found in Rural Areas

The *Bahasa Melayu* textbooks rarely depict the elderly as city inhabitants. The elderly instead wait in their country homes for their city-dwelling family members, usually younger generations, to visit them during the holidays (BM 1 [Abdul Rahman Bin Che Ngah, 2016], p. 63).

Furthermore, the textbooks define the probable physical appearances of the aged with images like having light white or grey hair, bent backs, furrowed brows, and wrinkled faces. Stereotypical male characters are usually bald, thin or frail-looking, and they often seem to be ill. Figures 7 and 8 below are good examples of this.



Figure 7: The standard physical appearance of the elderly
(Source: BM 1 [Abdul Rahman Bin Che Ngah, 2016], p. 1.)



Figure 8: The physical appearance of older people
(Source: BM 1 [Abdul Rahman Bin Che Ngah, 2016], p. 89.)

However, there are also some positive representations of the elderly offered in terms of their attitudes: some are commendably portrayed as examples of positive ageing, similar to the pathways outlined in the 2011 M5DF. Some of them are described below.

The elderly have different family roles

In the text, the elderly characters acknowledge their role when they are with family. They interact with and do activities with everyone, including the young people. Figure 9 below is a representation of a happy, harmonious family with members of all age groups present, preparing their meal together.

The aged are represented as being considered the most revered among family members. They share their wisdom on day to day living and act as problem solvers. This point is demonstrated in a story of a grandmother who educates her grandchild on ethical values through the moral stories she relates. The young child affirms this when she says; *Setiap kali bercerita, nenek berpesan kepada kami agar mengambil pengajaran daripada cerita yang disampaikan* (BM 5 [Siti Sarah Binti Abdul Malek, 2015], p. 16) - 'Every time she tells a story, grandmother reminds us to understand the key lessons therein'. This rendering attempts to implant in children's minds the concept that the elderly have more experience and are, therefore, able to solve problems more easily and effectively than younger people.



Figure 9: The elderly happily preparing meals with their family members
(Source: BM 2 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz & Marina Binti Mat Isa, 2013], p. 2.)

A further illustration of this idea is shown in a dialogue between a grandfather and grandson in the unit entitled, *Pembakar Lemang Modern* (BM 6 [Mat Ariffin Bin Ismail & Abdul Rahman Kamil Bin Abu Naim, 2015], p. 153). The vocabulary is concerned with the elderly encouraging and aiding the younger generations through problem-solving abilities gained from much experience: for example, *jangan bimbang* - 'Don't worry' and *Tuk ada jalan penyelesaiannya* - 'Grandfather has a solution' (BM 6 [Mat Ariffin Bin Ismail & Abdul Rahman Kamil Bin Abu Naim, 2015], p. 153, translated).

Respect for the elderly

The idea of the elderly being respected by younger generations has been effectively implemented in the textbooks. *BM 3* shows younger people assuming an attitude of humility towards their elders by bowing lower than them when they walk past them. (BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 59). The conversation below, between two students affirms this.

...Kita juga mestilah bersopan santun kepada orang tua.

(BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 59)

...We must be polite to the elderly.

(BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 59, translated)



Figure 10: A child bows when he walks past older people

(Source: BM 3 [Kamarudin Bin Jeon & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2013], p. 59.)

The elderly are knowledgeable

The elderly are seen as having considerable traditional knowledge and social wisdom. This point is illustrated through a conversation about banana leaves between a grandmother and her grandchild (BM 6 [Mat Ariffin Bin Ismail & Abdul Rahman Kamil Bin Abu Naim, 2015], p. 132). The dialogue is intended to portray an elderly character who teaches traditional cultural values to the younger generation and acknowledges their expected role within society while doing so. The phrase, *mengikut petua orang tua – tua...* - "...According to the practices of the elderly..." suggests their role as a source of traditional Malay familial wisdom. There are other examples showing them as inventors and innovators, but mostly in respect to agriculture (BM 1 [Abdul Rahman Bin Che Ngah, 2016], p. 110).

The elderly have experienced history

The elderly are acknowledged for their patriotic and historical roles in society (BM 5 [Siti Sarah Binti Abdul Malek, 2015], p. 143) since they have lived through many of the country's more significant events. This point is recounted by a boy whose

grandfather used to be part of the Malaysian independence movement in a story titled '*Nostalgia Datuk Saya*' (BM 4 [Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, 2016], p. 140).

Patriotism is underscored through this representation in which the elderly are charged with the patriotic responsibility of being models for the young. National independence and love for one's country are encouraged with elderly characters' words, phrases, and sentences such as: *datuk* – 'grandfather', and *rakan datuk*, – 'grandfather's friend', and, *menuntut kemerdekaan daripada penjajah* – 'to win independence from the colonisers', *Kita mesti bermati-matian menuntut kemerdekaan daripada orang British* - 'We had to fight till our last breath to get our independence from the British'.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The Malaysian government's definition of 'the elderly' is 60 and older (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), an age-distinction which differs by 5 years from the United Nation's 65 and older (United Nations, 2022). The governmental position increases the elderly pool as well as public perceptions as to when retirement and age-related disorders and debilities are expected to occur. Furthermore, Malaysia is projected to have an elderly *majority* society within another 6 to 16 years (between 2030 – 2040). Some scholars have suggested that the Malaysian government has less than ten years to prepare for this demographic and economic upheaval (Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin et al., 2019). Since currently some elderly are prone to potential abuse and neglect by their families, and by general social perceptions that their physical and mental states are declining (Nur Faizira Abdul Rahman et al., 2019), we feel it is essential for future Malaysian social and economic health that flawed perceptions as portrayed in the textbooks are readdressed.

Retired people are considered members of the elderly class mostly because of the government sanctioned and enforced number denoting their age. A negative effect of this is that the role of family leader as classified by government policy is a distinction belonging to the wealthiest earner. Relatively earlier mandatory retirement has relegated many of the elderly at 60 to reduced income and status, forced immobility, and deferment to richer/younger family (Weerasak et al, 2018).

Even though the Malaysian government enacted the first National Policy for the Elderly in 1995, and revised it in 2011, with the aim of protecting the elderly from abuse and neglect, the policy still does not empower them with opportunities to gain independent living. Nor does the policy actively provide robust opportunities for them to contribute socially. Some scholars have suggested that the government should characterise the elderly not as a class who 'deserve

charity', but as a class whose civil claims should be rooted in 'basic human rights' (Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin et al., 2019).

The elderly representations in the Malaysian national language textbooks as needing the help and care of others is dual-edged. On the positive side it invites empathy towards them; negatively though it portrays them as defective, weak, and reliant upon others. Health problems play a role in determining their behaviour since adequate standards of physical/mental health are harder for them to maintain (Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin et al., 2019). The textbooks depict them as potentially incapable of performing normal physical activities because of age-related functional impairments. This representation indirectly asserts that the elderly may typically be unable to live independently since they may require the help and care of their family members and/or society at large.

Nor do the writers describe with much detail the connectivity between the elderly and society. Two cases in point are the depicted communal social activities such as volunteering at hospitals or jointly engaging in physical exercise with other age groups. Psychologists suggest that society should emphasise and encourage elderly social connections to reduce feelings of loneliness and other adverse impacts that imposed isolation may incite (Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin et al., 2019).

It is a commonly held belief that the elderly have an abundance of skills, knowledge and experience since they have lived through so many different situations. Therefore, they are deserving of respect from younger generations as well as society in general. There is a famous Chinese proverb that encapsulates this belief that claims "a family with an old person has a living treasure of gold" (Zulazhar Tahir et al., 2019). It highlights their status as beloved and precious as they are able to educate younger generations about moral values as well as folk issues. The national language textbooks do effectively portray this concept, but most of the contents reflect the belief that they are perennially weak, ill and needy. (Please refer to Table 1: Representations of Elderly Expertise/Infirmary per BM Levels for further quantification of negative examples).

Financial Literacy and Innovative aid programs

BM 1-6 do not mention financial problems faced by the elderly -- possibly because it can be a complex issue beyond the standard comprehension of young readers. However, the reality is that it is a very common problem among the elderly, especially since they may have been exposed to predatory lenders, or to financial scams, or to economic crises, or even familial exploitation, or maybe have just failed to adequately plan their personal finances. This point is mentioned in the M5DF under the economy section. Maybe in future revisions, the textbook writers

could include examples of elderly who have ample savings, or a stable financial situation, and are able to live happily and healthily without troubling their family members.

Representations of the elderly as weak and/or ill are sometimes appropriate because in some ways they are frequently realistic. The objections to these kinds of portrayals stem from the fact that there are many other possible positive truths that could be described and implanted within a child's consciousness. Many elderly certainly can live independently because they possess solid physical and financial health. Perhaps, though, a more crucial observation is that the public healthcare and welfare services offered to the elderly by the Ministry of Health are now considered, although frequently inadequate by themselves, not only in Malaysia, but in many other countries, to be basic rights. For example, the Malaysian program called *MySalam* provides assistance on *takaful*-insurance related matters to provide for the healthcare needs of low income groups in relation to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). *MySalam* is a free '*takaful*' (Islamic insurance) scheme from the Malaysian government for the B40 group, launched in 2019. It offers RM8,000 for critical illness and RM50 daily for hospitalisation costs up to RM700 yearly. Managed by Great Eastern Takaful Berhad, it complies with Shariah law and, due to its success, has been extended to 2025. Eligibility is automatic for recipients of government cash assistance programs. Each eligible individual, which includes those from the bottom economic 40 % (B40) of society, can access this program. The *MySalam* program operates activity centres provided by *Pusat Aktiviti Warga Emas* (PAWE, a.k.a. Senior Citizens Activity Centres), home health services operated by NGOs, a mobile care service under *Unit Penyayang Warga Emas* (UPWE, Caring for the Senior Citizens Unit), as well as homes for the elderly, artificial support equipment assistance, and financial assistance (Mohd Fazari Mohd Salleh, 2017). The isolated elderly could possibly benefit greatly from this home help service. It is available nationwide since various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a network of 2,150 volunteers are already offering it. However, only 5,892 senior citizens were accessing it as of 2017 (Mohd Fazari Mohd Salleh, 2017). Currently in 2024, the Malaysian government continues to increase the number of these centers, aiming to support the active engagement of senior citizens throughout the country (*The Star*, 2020).

The UPWE is administered by the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. The PAWE is a community social centre where the elderly can meet and engage in various pursuits. The PAWE furnishes social assistance and backs elderly community growth and improvement. It is a governmental push that sees the

ministry, other government agencies, and NGOs collaborating with each other. The PAWE project has some common themes:

1. Expansion of physical facilities offered to the elderly.
2. Creation of locations and safe spaces in which the elderly can exchange experiences and share their skills.
3. Strengthening of collaboration among various institutional participants
4. Provision of a support network for the elderly who are poor and/or alone.
5. Improvement of quality of life for the elderly by offering them healthy productive activities.

PAWE has 51 activity centers which manage multiple free programs, related to religion, recreation, therapy and rehabilitation, health, and vocational training and which can be accessed by anyone.

The UPWE provides a mobile service which is run by the Central Welfare Council of Malaysia and managed by the Department of Social Welfare. They provide facilities for senior citizens with physical restrictions or mental disabilities where they can get critical treatments and services necessary for their health. They provide transportation for those who live alone and/or who cannot afford it so they can get medical treatment and other essential services.

Homes for the elderly aim to give the elderly security and protection. There are nine *Rumah Seri Kenangan* (RSK) or homes operated by the government whose facilities serve about 1,800 residents. Privately-run homes under the auspices of the Care Centres Act of 1993 consist of 310 locations which service about 7,000 senior citizens (Mohd Fazari Mohd Salleh, 2017).

While we could not find government published data on the success rate of the social support programs they have put in place, new statements and objectives have since been issued showing an intention to put more fiscal support into them. The government has committed RM635 million by the year 2030 (The Vibes, 2023; *Malay Mail*, 2022).

These programs can be valuable and effective if the aim is to improve the quality of life of the elderly population. However, our point is that the Malaysian National Language textbooks should be revised as a means by which a greater awareness of these life-long accessible social benefits can be fostered.

CONCLUSION

Both positive and negative representations of the elderly have been created in Malaysian children's textbooks. This study provides evidence that they are

represented in primary school national language textbooks without much reference to prescribed guidelines published in the 2011 Malaysian Five Dimensions Framework of National Policy for Older People. On the contrary, they are still mostly represented with biased representations as being weak, ill, in need of help, and unable to effectively contribute to society.

The state and the textbook writers are a powerful class of people who can create meaning through representations of things or people and transmit them as factual to malleable primary school children. After exposure and lessons in early textbooks like the *BM*, these meanings are circulated widely throughout society. As Natthaporn Panpothong (2015) pointed out: “while older children might be able to reinterpret or resist messages in textbooks, it is unlikely that elementary students have the potential to oppose what is taught...Thus, the authorised textbooks seem to play a crucial part” (p. 68) in influencing their thinking and feelings about the elderly, as well as the many other issues that they address. This study has used the representation approach to reveal and analyse the representations, stereotypes, and biases which are controlled by the dominant classes, their governments, and their textbook writers towards *subordinate* classes -- in other words, the very young school children who read the textbooks.

The writers could always create better representations of the elderly as full of energy and a zest for life or living healthy lifestyles by engaging in exercise and eating healthy foods, as well as inclusively engaging socially with each other and with other generations. Besides that, all elderly should be made aware of their rights and welfares as provided by the government. Many of them possess traditional wisdom and considerable practical knowledge, and given the opportunity could understand and adapt to the modern world with its newer technology. These new representations of the elderly would make them more valued and better appreciated.

Rights of the elderly are recognised as equal to (those of) any ordinary person in matters of health, employment, environment and family. Therefore, textbook writers should illustrate the elderly in accordance with more positive criteria in which these rights and their social roles are made more well-known. The Ministry of Education could create new curricula for the composition of textbooks, which include new representations of the elderly, that promote more awareness of the above-mentioned rights. This would diminish the pervasiveness of the standard negative stereotypes of them being weak, ill, poor, introverted and noncontributors to society. As mentioned in the National Policy on Older Persons 2011, the Malaysian government wants “to create older persons who are independent, (have) dignity, (have a) high sense of self-worth, and (are) respected, by optimising their self-potential through a healthy, positive, active, productive

and supportive ageing to have well-being” (The National Policy on Older Persons, 2011). New representations will indirectly promote positive elderly models for children and society as well as reduce problems like elderly abuse and abandonment

REFERENCES

- Abdul Rahman Bin Che Ngah. (2016). *Buku teks bahasa Malaysia Tahun 1 sekolah kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Ayamany, K. (2021, September 24). As life in Malaysia turns digital due to Covid-19, elderly may be left behind. *Malay Mail*.
<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/09/24/as-life-in-malaysia-turns-digital-due-to-covid-19-elderly-may-be-left-behind/2007956>
- Chang, F. C., Pazim, K. H., & Mansur, K. (2020). Ageing population: policies and programmes for older people in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 92-96.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2024). Population and housing census. Government of Malaysia.
<https://open.dosm.gov.my/dashboard/population>
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices*. SAGE.
- Ibrahim, R. B., Hamid, T. A., Chai, S. T., & Abdullah, S. F. Z. (2016). Malaysia. In B. Findsen & M. Formosa (Eds.), *International perspectives on older adult education* (Vol. 22, pp. 329–340). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24939-1_22
- Kamarudin Bin Jeon, & Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz. (2013). *Buku teks bahasa Malaysia Tahun 3 sekolah kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Lim, T. G., Gomes, A., & Rahman, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, present and future*. Malaysia Institute of Development and Asia Studies (MIDAS) UCSI University.
- Making digital technologies accessible to the elderly. (2023). Ministry of Communications and Digital.
<https://www.kkd.gov.my/en/public/news/21954-making-digital-technologies-accessible-to-the-elderly>
- Malay Mail*. (2022, January 18). Govt allocates RM635m for welfare of senior citizens, says deputy minister.

https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/01/18/govt-allocates-rm635m-for-welfare-of-senior-citizens-says-deputy-minister/2035980#google_vignette

- Mat Ariffin Bin Ismail, & Abdul Rahman Kamil Bin Abu Naim. (2015). *Buku teks bahasa Malaysia Tahun 6 sekolah kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Mohd Fazari Mohd Salleh. (2017). *Ageing in an inclusive society: Social support system for older persons in Malaysia*. Senior Officials Meeting MOST. Slides. MOST, 13(2). Retrieved from https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files/Muat%20Turun/MOST/S4_P1_Tuan%20Hj_%20Fazari.pdf
- Natthaporn Panpothong. (2015). Thai primary school history textbooks: A textually oriented Critical Discourse Analysis. *Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 34(1), 66-93.
- Nor Ain Mohamed Radhi, & Tharanya Arumugam. (2009, December 15). Are we ready for an aging Malaysia? *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/exclusive/2019/12/548012/are-we-ready-ageing-malaysia>
- Nur Faizira Abdul Rahman, Zulazhar Tahir, Siti Zaharah Jamaludin, Jal Zabdi Mohd Yusoff, Sridevi Thambapillay, & Mohammad Abu Taher. (2019). Protecting the elderly in Malaysia: The way forward. In Zulazhar Tahir, Siti Zaharah Jamaludin, Jal Zabdi Mohd Yusoff, Sridevi Thambapillay, Mohammad Abu Taher, & Nur Faizira Abdul Rahman (Eds.), *Elder abuse and neglect in selected Asian countries* (pp. 245-250). University of Malaya Press.
- O' Shaughnessy, M., & Stadler, J. (2005). *Media and society: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Ong, F. S. (2002). Ageing in Malaysia: A review of national policies and programmes. In D. R. Phillips & A. C. M. Chan (Eds.), *Ageing and long-term care: National policies in the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 107-149). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz, & Marina Binti Mat Isa. (2013). *Buku teks bahasa Malaysia Tahun 2 sekolah kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Siti Hajar Binti Abdul Aziz. (2016). *Buku Teks Bahasa Malaysia Tahun 4 Sekolah Kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Siti Sarah Binti Abdul Malek. (2015). *Buku teks bahasa Malaysia Tahun 5 sekolah kebangsaan*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin, Zulazhar Tahir, Jal Zabdi Mohd Yusoff, Sridevi Thambapillay, & Mohammad Abu Taher. (2019). *Elder abuse and neglect*

- in Malaysia: An overview. In Zulazhar Tahir, Siti Zaharah Jamaludin, Jal Zabdi Mohd Yusoff, Sridevi Thambapillay, Mohammad Abu Taher, & Nur Faizira Abdul Rahman (Eds.), *Elder abuse and neglect in selected Asian countries* (pp. 9-30). University of Malaya Press.
- Tan, O. S. L., Khan, S., Vergara, R. G., & Khan, N. (2016). Policies and Protections for Ageing Society in Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Research*, 2016, Article ID 974366. DOI: 10.5171/2016.974366
- Tengku Aizan Hamid, & Nurizan Yahaya. (2008). National policy for the elderly in Malaysia: Achievements and challenges. In Lee H. G. (Ed.), *Ageing in Southeast and East Asia: Family, social protection, policy challenges* (pp. 108-133). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Tuan Hj. Fazari. (n.d.). *Ageing in an inclusive society*. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Retrieved from https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files/Muat%20Turun/MOST/S4_P1_Tuan%20Hj_%20Fazari.pdf
- National 4IR Policy set to transform Malaysia into a high-income, technology-driven country. (2021, July 1). Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA). <https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/national-4ir-policy-set-to-transform-malaysia-into-a-high-income-technology-driven-country/>
- The Star*. (2020, October 6). Plans for more programmes for senior citizens at activity centres in Johor. <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2020/10/06/plans-for-more-programmes-for-senior-citizens-at-activity-centres-in-johor>
- The Vibes. (2023, October 2). Govt eyes more elderly activity centres as nation ages. <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/99121/govt-eyes-more-elderly-activity-centres-as-nation-ages>
- United Nations. (2022). *World population prospects 2022*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf
- University of the Third Age Malaysia. (2023). Institut Penyelidikan Penuaan Malaysia, MyAgeing, Universiti Putra Malaysia. <https://u3aklssel.wixsite.com/malaysia>
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1987). *Communicating racism: Ethnic prejudice in thought and talk*. SAGE.
- Weerasak Muangpaisan, Prasert Assantachai, Rossarin Gray, Siriphan Sasat and Rungnirand Praditsuwan (2560 B.E./2018). Khwam Chara lae Wongjorn

Chiwit [Aging and life cycle]. In *Saranukrom Thai chabab phu sungwai* [Thai encyclopedia of aging People]. (pp.7-51) Thai Youth Encyclopedia Project. Zulazhar Tahir, Siti Zaharah Jamaludin, Jal Zabdi Mohd Yusoff, Sridevi Thambapillay, Mohammad Abu Taher, Nur Faizira Abdul Rahman (Eds.). (2019). *Elder abuse and neglect in selected Asian countries*. University of Malaya Press.

How to cite this article (APA):

Mekhirunsiri, P., & Sathian, M. R. (2024). Representations of the elderly in Malaysian primary school national language textbooks. *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29(2), 143-168.

Date received: 2 October 2023

Date of acceptance: 8 September 2024