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Presenting an opportunity for change

EDUCATIONISTS who are unhappy with our overly exam-oriented education system see the appointment of the new Education Minister as a great opportunity for change.

Former NUTP president Gurnam Singh, describes Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's move to appoint Senator Tan Sri Dr Musa Mohamad to the Cabinet post as a brilliant one.

Gurnam says Musa would have a much freer hand to introduce education policies that are in the best interest of the nation as he would not be as susceptible to the sort of pressures that politicians are normally exposed to.

"This is a very good opportunity for us to overhaul the education system because we have a non-politician as Minister of Education. He will do what he thinks is right because he doesn't have to worry about his constituents or what people will say.

"There's nothing like having someone who has experience in education." Gurnam who has studied the education systems of many countries during his tenure as Education International's chief co-ordinator for the Asia-Pacific region, says our exam-oriented system is putting too much pressure on children and taking all the fun out of learning.

"There is so much pressure and so many books. In my time there were only a few books. Was my education in any way inferior? I don't think so."

Ambitious Malaysian parents, he adds, are equally to blame for exerting too much pressure on their children to excel academically.

"We used to have so many games. We had so much fun playing football in the rain. Nowadays children don't have time to play. They don't get to grow up naturally. At the most, they get to watch TV or play a few computer games.

"Are parents happy with the way our children grow up? Are our children happy? Do our children enjoy education? I'm sure they are not enjoying it."

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturer and psychiatrist Dr Rose Peng says something has to be done to make education enjoyable because children learn more when they are having fun in class.

"We find children refusing to go to school because it's such a battlefield for them. It's not fun anymore. Children actually learn more when they are having fun."

This over-emphasis on academic achievement has also led to the unfortunate tendency among Malaysians, says Peng, to label individuals who do not perform well academically, as failures.

"Too much emphasis on academics takes away the pride of a lot of people. It makes them feel they are losers all their lives just because they are not good academically.

INSTEAD of putting them down for being weak in academics, we should help them find out what they are good at, and encourage them to excel in those areas, adds Peng.

"And until and unless the education system is changed to recognise and help such individuals to achieve their full potential, the country will continue to lose out on all the talent that they can contribute to society.

"They could be good technically or artistically. Those talents should have been nurtured from an early age so the child knows what he is good

at.

"We need to appreciate what the child can do instead of putting him down for what he is not good at.

"People have this impression that colleges that cater to the development of artistic and creative skills are for dropouts. That's why we lose out on a lot of creative people."

Peng adds that our education system's over-emphasis on academic achievement also retards the development of our young as well-rounded, creative, happy and socially well-adjusted human beings.

"Our education system produces achievers yes, but no soul. They can't appreciate themselves. Do we want to culture such a society?"

Peng expresses the hope that we will learn from the examples of developed countries that have changed the orientation of their education systems from being exam-based to achievement-based.

"Many countries have learnt from their mistakes. For example, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States are not exam-oriented. They are achievement-oriented.

"In these countries, it is not so much teachers teaching but teachers helping students to learn.

"They recognise the right of individuals to be different. It means encouraging students to go into a field they are most comfortable with and being proud about their achievements in that field."

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