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A sense of pride in our potential

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Training is everything. A cauliflower is nothing but a cabbage with a college education. - Mark Twain

FIRSTLY, this is not about politics. It is not even about academics. It is beyond that. It is about creating a nation that fully taps its intellectual property. And the spotlight right now is on meritocracy.

Meritocracy has surfaced, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced - with a vision for the future and not merely for pleasing the present generation.

Dr Mahathir states that progress is not made by taking pride in our present standards but by critically examining these standards, setting higher standards and attempting to achieve them.

Barely one week after amending the Constitution that did away with gender-bias, Dr Mahathir has proposed meritocracy for admission into universities.

Although he has said that this would be done in stages, this is the beginning. And what will count from now on will be its implementation and the transparency of it.

Whoever we are and whatever our origins, it would give us a great sense of pride if we were recognised for our potential and our merit. That would be the real challenge.

That reminds me of my Form Six days when I used to study with a whole group of Malay friends - Zarina, Shameem, Noor Jalilah, Fatimah, Rofidah, Azeem and many others. All of us had the same determination and put in the same effort in the paper chase that would fulfil all our dreams.

One day, I teased Zarina (who is a doctor now) that it was easier for her to get into the university because she had both merit as well as a system that supported her.

She got really mad and flared up and declared that "the quota system was an insult to her intelligence" as she was as good as anyone or in fact better. Actually, I admit that she was indeed far better.

There are thousands of Zarinas in the country. They are born intelligent, have gone to Government schools, and would easily sail into university purely on merit. The only reason they are not doing so is because they have a weak foundation right from primary schools.

Education is a process that begins at an early age. And meritocracy should be a concept that has to be instilled right from primary school. I believe that primary school education is the most formative in one's life.

The future of our development is written in the classrooms, and mostly in the hands of the teacher. Teachers should be held in the highest honour. A good teacher can change a delinquent into a solid student.

Unfortunately in Malaysia, teachers are given less importance than they deserve. They have few incentives to motivate students or be motivated themselves.

However, we are aware that a large percentage of Malay students are from poor backgrounds and rural settings where there are poor facilities at home and at school which hinder their academic performance.

We need a comprehensive look at the problem of under-achievers to identify when and where students start slacking off. What is the calibre of teachers in these schools? What are the facilities that are offered?

If the child's fundamentals are weak and he gains entry through the preferential system, he will suffer from the Pygmalion effect. He may have

entrenched in himself a subsidy mentality which may well erode his confidence.

With globalisation, our local universities have to subscribe to international barometers and we cannot afford to produce graduates below excellence.