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Need to revamp school system

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MALAYSIANS have seen what can happen when racial tolerance is stretched to breaking point in a multi-ethnic society.

Whether it occurs in places too far away to be of any consequence or in our own neighbourhood, the results are the same - disastrous. And it rarely takes overnight for the situation to mend.

Malaysians, of various racial backgrounds, enjoy a relatively harmonious existence.

But, the Government has realised, more can and should be done to strengthen ties. History, and recent events, has demonstrated that this is necessary, if not absolutely vital to ensure the nation's continued stability.

Much has been said of racial polarisation in the country's institutions of higher learning. Steps taken by the respective universities to counter this have, to a certain extent, been successful although the problem is far from resolved.

But now, it appears that a similar problem exists further down the education system.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently said the education system has not been able to achieve the desired results where national integration was concerned.

He added that the Government would study the weaknesses in the education system which had resulted in some parents not sending their children to national schools.

The Prime Minister spoke of the fear some non-Malay parents have of sending their children to national schools. The perception is that these schools focus too much on religion and practise inferior disciplining methods.

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad had acknowledged this earlier. He said national schools were becoming "increasingly Malay".

Some 88 per cent of Chinese primary students go to Chinese schools.

"If we go on like this, children of different races will be going their separate ways at primary level and it will be difficult to bring them together later.

"They are trained at six or seven years of age to separate. When they later come together at secondary school, they tend to segregate themselves."

Which is why he feels it is important to go ahead with the Vision School project "no matter what".

The project, which will see national and national-type schools sharing the same compound, has been met with strenuous opposition from Chinese education associations although the construction of schools under the pilot project has begun.

Why are Chinese students, especially, distancing themselves from national schools? What are the weaknesses in the current school system causing these students to opt for national-type schools?

Would a single stream schooling system, as proposed by some, help foster greater racial unity? And if not, what could?

Educationists observe that Chinese parents are becoming more comfortable with national-type schools. However, not all feel that religion and discipline are the reasons driving parents to send their children elsewhere.

The problems in the national school system, they feel, are manifold; and a revamp is necessary to help parents regain their confidence in the schools, and bring about a more harmonious interaction among the races.

National Union of Teaching Profession secretary-general N. Siva Subramaniam feels a public inquiry is necessary to find out what the people really want from the education system.

"We hear so much talk about national schools and national-type schools. Some say there should be a single stream schooling system to help foster racial unity.

"But national-type schools are not the problem. Chinese parents, for instance, are choosing to send their children to Chinese schools because they feel they can offer students something national schools cannot."

The excellence demonstrated by Chinese schools is acknowledged by Kolej Damansara Utama director of studies Dr Gan Siowck Lee.

"Chinese schools excel because they have a tradition which is closely linked to Confucianism, which emphasises discipline."

Malaysian English Language Teachers' Association president Dr Hyacinth Gaudart says even non-Chinese parents send their children to Chinese schools because of the quality of education offered by them.

How can national schools achieve a similar plane of excellence? The answer, Siva says, is to address the current weaknesses in the system.

"The only way to do this is to find out from the people what they want. The people must submit proposals on how the system can be revamped."

Social activist Datuk Lee Lam Thye agrees. He wants a commission to be established to determine how the education system can be reformed. "Input should be gleaned from Government agencies, non-governmental organisations, educators and parents."

Lee, however, believes the current education system should remain as it is. This means national and national-type schools should be retained.

"However, more programmes must be formulated to bring about interaction among students."

He stresses that teachers must also play their role and help promote interaction among students of different races.

Other educationists hint at the prevailing problems in the national school system - stumbling blocks that encompass more than just those related to discipline or religion - and ways to rectify them.

Former Education Ministry principal assistant director of resource centres (Education Technology) Rita Vias says that apart from addressing the inherent weaknesses in the system, the Government must realise that racial harmony is "caught more than taught".

By this, Vias believes that if adults in schools and at home make differences in race, children will do the same.

"Inter-racial harmony is reflected within the ethos of the school which is created and fostered by the school principal and the teachers," she says, adding that it is also a responsibility which should be shouldered by parents, particularly through parent-teacher associations.

An ideal ethos would embrace the concept of inter-racial harmony as the "acceptance of the individual on his own merit and not for what his race is".

An educationist for 28 years, Vias recommends that a review of the education system look at how "inter-rationally harmonious" the behaviour of teachers at school is.

A related aspect to be considered is the reward of students.

"Rewarding students according to merit rather than other criteria will reduce disharmony," she said, citing as examples, the selection of school prefects and other student representatives.

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

dean Professor Datuk Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid offers his suggestion on how the current school system can be improved.

"It is a simple yet complex matter where policy alone is not the solution."

He proposes that national schools be made more attractive by modelling them after the premier schools of yesteryear such as Malay College Kuala Kangsar, Malay Girls' College, Penang Free School and Victoria Institution.

"These were schools with strong traditions and have successfully created all-rounded individuals.

"Their reputation was so great that even Malays did not hesitate to send their children there despite having missionaries as principals."

In its paper calling for a revamp of the education system, submitted to the Education Minister last year, the NUTP called for a re-look at mindsets.

Singling out the examination system, the union says such a results-oriented system has produced a culture of academic excellence, but at a price.

Such a system has killed the joy of learning among students who "mug well but throw their books out the window once examinations are over".

Among the recommendations made for the revamp are:

- \* Introducing project work as a means of facilitating research and individual inquiry \_ in essence, "a new form of learning";

- \* Making school hours shorter to enable the process of learning to be more productive;

- \* Getting school principals to adapt to change particularly by allowing their teachers more creative freedom and;

- \* Producing teachers who are prepared for students who raise questions and express differing views.

Over and above such recommendations, the union called for new methods of teaching and learning through the medium of information technology.

One way of ensuring this is to make it a policy for every two students to be provided with a computer and for every teacher to be equipped with one.

The path towards eradicating all weaknesses in the system will be one fraught with many obstacles. But it will be well worth the effort.

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