

16/08/2002

Tackle racial polarisation in schools before it gets worse

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I AM glad that our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has struck at another weakness in our fragile community.

The need for inter-racial mixing and understanding is indeed vital to our very future as a multi-racial country.

As he pointed out, at every level of the education spectrum polarisation is getting worse. The Ministry of Education is aware of this and it has come up with some solutions.

However, racists will always be against any changes in the present system of education.

The Vision School concept, which is the best compromise, could bring together the three major races in one compound. However, bigots opposed it for their own selfish reasons.

At the secondary school level there should not be any segregation of pupils because the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia, yet we find schools with 90 to 100 per cent of pupils made up of one race (Malay or Chinese).

Who do we blame for such a situation? Surely not the Chinese guilds and societies.

Yet they were blamed in recent situations, such as the case of a certain board of governors which opposed pupils from a school in Batu Gajah from being moved to a new Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan and managed to get them re-instated in their former Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (SMJK).

These people would never have achieved their narrow-minded plans had they not been backed by politicians (some even from Barisan Nasional component parties).

I have always called for politicians to lay their hands off schools and reasonable education policies.

We see a perpetuation of schools with predominantly one race. This situation arises when SJK(C) pupils are sent to SMJK.

Schools with predominantly Malay pupils are situated in rural areas.

It is risky to rock the fragile balance here but something can be done to help pupils in such schools mix with other races.

When I was in a SMJK as an afternoon supervisor and was put in charge of cultural activities, I suggested that my Chinese majority (almost absolute majority) school adopt a near absolute Malay populated school as a partner school where activities could be shared so as to get the races to mix with each other.

This idea was rejected by the headmaster then. Such a programme has some merit and should be looked into by the Ministry of Education.

Another solution is for the ministry to send at least 10 per cent of pupils of other races to schools with a 90 to 100 per cent population of a single race.

Minor as the percentage may be, it will go a long way in helping pupils understand the various races.

Encourage non-Muslims to attend Muslim religious activities at university level too. After all, undergraduates should be able to think for themselves and be open to all sorts of knowledge.

As a Chinese I will not object to my child attending talks on Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc, at the university when she is old enough to decide for herself what is right or wrong and what is good or bad.

It will also allow non-Muslims to understand our major religion.

Muslims, if not motivated by narrow political agenda, will welcome others to join their activities.

Unfortunately, many lecturers and undergraduates are politically-motivated in their actions and not by their religion.

The time has come when all Malaysians must think of ways to be true Malaysians and live in peace and harmony with one another.

In the past, before independence, I went to school with a Malay friend who lived down the road. We walked together and we shared lots of common joys and experiences.

This was not in a kampung environment - it was in Ipoh and the school we went to was the Anglo-Chinese School, Ipoh.

I sat with an Indian boy in class (now a famous local film and drama actor) and I fought with Chinese boys (some directors of major companies now).

What is the present situation in schools? Walk into a classroom and you see, even in a mixed school, separate rows of Indians, Chinese and Malays.

In the canteen and in the playing fields, groups of Chinese, Indians and Malays go about separately.

On the surface we present a united front, but at the root of society, we are segregated! Who is to blame? Let us search our souls for the answer