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## Preference for Chinese schools

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IS discipline the only reason to send your child to a Chinese school?

Since 1999, a record number of Chinese students have opted to study in Chinese schools, reversing a decade-long decline in enrolment.

Chinese families cite discipline as the main reason, but dig deeper and you uncover other contributing factors.

One is the idea that non-Malay children may be marginalised in national schools.

"It's a catch-22 situation. You want to keep the Chinese in national schools, but we feel overwhelmed by the huge number of Malays in those schools," says one parent whose children are in a Kuala Lumpur Chinese school.

"So if you want your children there for integration purposes, it doesn't work - because there is such a large number of one race, hardly any integration takes place."

Their small presence, she says, also makes them feel like second-class citizens.

"Just before my son sat for the UPSR exam, the headmaster invited parents for a motivational session. And throughout, he only addressed the Muslim parents, as if the others did not exist," says one Malay woman who noticed the "bias".

This may not be deliberate, says one political observer who describes such behaviour as "the chauvinism of the majority".

Besides, says another observer, Chinese students may be doing well enough that teachers feel they should concentrate on those needing help. Still, actions like these, intentional or otherwise, may have contributed to the recent uproar over segregation in schools.

However, not all see race as a reason for leaving national schools.

"It's a question of practicality," insists teacher Lau Tong who spent seven years teaching in a Chinese school in Johor Baru.

What's important, he says, is the level of commitment shown by teachers.

"Teachers in Chinese schools are hired on contract, which is reviewed every year. So to earn another contract you have to prove yourself first. That is what keeps the Chinese school teachers on their toes.

"And Chinese schools are traditionally strong in Mathematics and Science. That's an added attraction. In today's world, Maths and Science are important so it's only natural that you want to send your children to a Chinese school," he says.

Another reason that Chinese schools are seeing higher enrolment rates in recent years may be the notion that national schools sometimes give extra emphasis to Muslim practices while neglecting other cultures or religions.

A case in point was the 1980s when all children in national primary schools were required to learn Jawi.

"Why Jawi, when it is irrelevant to non-Muslims? If it were Japanese, I would understand," recalls Wong Kim Kong, whose three sons are in a Chinese primary school in Rawang.

"Other forms of subtle Islamic emphasis can be found in some textbook illustrations, examples or quotations, or it is on the part of the teachers themselves," says Wong, who adds that he's come across several Indian and Chinese parents who share this view.

"Teachers can do so much more to push for the creation of bangsa Malaysia," says a 17-year-old Chinese boy in a Bangsar national school.

"When Sept 11 came, not a single teacher addressed the issue. Why not? We could have learnt so much from a discussion on that. We would also have used that incident to look at our situation here but nothing was said or done," he adds.

Despite these grouses, the main push factor is the feeling that national schools simply do not meet a high enough educational standard.

"My daughter did not have a Maths teacher for two years. This year, she sat for her PMR exam without any foundation in the subject," says a mother whose children attend national schools.

"This means that if you don't have money for tuition, your kids are finished!"

Established Chinese schools are also affiliated with tertiary institutions abroad. The Kwan Ching Secondary School, for example, allows students to sit for entrance exams into various institutions overseas.

If you pass the exam, you get into the college or university without any hassle.

Such independently-built networks with educational institutions outside of Malaysia makes established Chinese schools very attractive to many people, says Rita Sim, a mother of two.

For many Chinese in Johor, a Chinese school education is preferable to that of national school because of the proximity to institutions in Singapore.

"Like many other Chinese parents, I would rather my children pursue their education here and go to a local university," says Lau Tong, a retired teacher.

"But the quota system makes it competitive so Singapore is a good option for us. Our children can always travel back and forth if they study in Singapore.

"This is why Mandarin is important. Singapore has colleges, technical colleges and universities where Mandarin is the medium of instruction," says Lau.

Of course, Singapore has also taken advantage of this fact by making scholarships available to students from Malaysian Chinese schools.

Cultural roots is another reason why many families send children to Chinese schools.

"This may be a direct response to the Islamic revival. When the Malays started becoming more conscious about their religion, the Chinese were forced to look at their own identity," says Rita.

Intriguingly, more and more parents from the overseas-trained, professional, English-speaking class, are also sending their children to Chinese schools.

"At the heart of it is the belief in preserving one's cultural roots. Along with that comes the Chinese work ethic of discipline and academic excellence," said an ex-teacher.

"Initially," says Pat Lu, "I had fears of putting them in a Chinese school. I was afraid they would not be able to cope. There is this perception that the schools give too much homework."

Her two children will be in Standard Two this year at Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) Damansara in Tropicana.

"But actually, the kids can handle it. It is all about discipline. The environment is such that everyone works hard together. The students see their peers working hard so they are spurred on to healthy competition.

"The problem with modern parents is they think their kids cannot handle the load."

Pat, who heads Rayma Sdn Bhd, a training provider company, finds her children's teachers so committed that she was "totally floored" when her son's teacher offered to give him free Mandarin tuition once a week.

"My son had difficulty with the language and noting this, his teacher called me and said she would teach him for free because she didn't want him to lag behind.

"I was totally impressed."

Lee Soon Lin, who sends all her three children to Chinese schools, says her main reason for doing so is because she herself studied at one.

"It is also good for them to know Mandarin. And being Chinese-educated myself, I am better able to supervise their performance."

For Pat, learning Mandarin is more than a cultural affinity. It is a question of economic value.

"I foresee China opening up and becoming an economic powerhouse. My kids must know Mandarin if they want to do business in the future. Mandarin is an economic language; learning it is not just about cultural identification."

Pat even thinks all Malaysians, regardless of race, should learn Mandarin out of necessity.

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said learning English does not make us any less nationalistic. I think the same applies to Mandarin.

"To be successful in the world, it won't be enough to speak Mandarin. You must know how to read agreements, understand the nuances, deal with clients," she said, regretting that in her own business she requires a translator to help with deals from China.

"If you talk about raising the future standard of living, you must learn Mandarin. The whole world today is looking towards China."

She points out that with China offering a huge market for local tourism, Mandarin would be an essential language in the hospitality industry.

Strong moral teaching is another reason parents are attracted to Chinese primary education.

"It is a cultural thing; to instil discipline and respect for elders in the young," says Lee.

Even teachers in national secondary schools notice the difference in some of their students who come from Chinese primary schools.

"I thanked a student for helping me with some work and he replied in Mandarin 'I do it because you are my elder'.

"I knew then that this student came from a Chinese school. No other student would have answered me that way," says an English teacher in a Subang Jaya school.

But she also notes that a Chinese-education background can pose its own set of problems for certain students.

"Many problem students come from Chinese schools. It is the language barrier that frightens them. Some are not able to improve their English or Bahasa Malaysia and lose interest in their studies."

Students who have no intention of joining Government service also make very little effort to improve their English or Bahasa Malaysia.

The willingness to pick up languages other than Mandarin could depend on the type of family background a student comes from. Many from exclusively Chinese-speaking families would probably have such an attitude towards other languages.

Despite tremendous support from the community, some feel that Chinese primary education may not be getting the chance to develop further.

The Institute of Strategic Analysis and Policy Research, an MCA think tank, has found a shortage of Chinese schools in new housing estates and areas with a high Chinese population.

"The reality is that applications to build new Chinese schools do not often find approval," it noted in a report, excerpts of which were given to the NST.

"The reasons include lack of suitable land and bureaucracy by State government agencies."

Perhaps, by curbing the growth of such schools, non-Malays can be encouraged to attend national schools, says one political observer.

If this is the rationale, the Government must find ways to make national schools relevant and superior to Chinese schools. Only this will allow for a better representation of all races in national schools.

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