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Give us disciplined students

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SPARE the rotan and spoil the child. Bestowing rewards and inflicting punishments are indispensable in the management of schoolchildren. Inspire pupils (or the workforce) with a sense of shame and will a great thirst for praise (or promotion). Honour him when he does well; treat him with neglect (even scorn) when he acts amiss.

I believe this line will produce much better discipline and productivity. Perhaps all boarding schools should be directly under the Ministry of Education, as was the case during colonial times. Nothing like what is happening today happened then.

The district education office doesn't seem able to cope with this responsibility and I do not expect it to either. Boarding schools are too precious to be left to such subordinate authority.

In journalism, more than in any other field where change is a constant, the price of believing in something is often egg in the face. Last week, this newspaper strongly called for a clampdown on delinquency in residential schools after a series of violent incidents, citing my alma mater the Malay College Kuala Kangsar as an exemplar of discipline throughout its illustrious 98-year history. On Friday, it was confirmed that eight students of the MCKK had been expelled for causing trouble, some of them for threatening a warden with parang.

"Serves you right," my wife told me (she was educated at the Malay Girls' College, now renamed Tengku Kurshiah College). Perhaps, I had spoken too soon and at too great a distance from my fondly remembered days as a budak kolej. Many of my critics (another price of strongly expressed beliefs) have taken my indebtedness to the MCKK as an excuse for elitism and hubris.

But I make no apologies for refusing to understate what it meant to me. The British-run boarding school modelled on Eton taught me to believe in the transforming power of education. The MCKK was my great leap forward, launching me from under the tempurung of the village of Kok Lanis in Kelantan into a milieu where the world was my oyster.

No wonder education under the British was a privilege not freely granted. It was necessary for us to learn English and go under the rigorous tutelage of our colonial masters before we could pick up the self-confidence to kick them out.

The same reasoning is reprised today - we must reinstate the learning of English if we are not to fall under the thumb of those more powerful than we are. Monolingual philistinism, then as now, will leave us downtrodden and defenceless.

My contemporaries felt as deeply as I did. Apart from the government-enforced national restructuring of the New Economic Policy beginning in 1972, all of us agreed that education was the ticket to Bumiputera parity with the other races in those days of acute and tension-ridden division.

Tun Razak told me many times that the indigenous Malays stood no chance of levelling up to the more aggressive non-Malays unless they took education seriously. The same statement has been repeated ad nauseam by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In one of his first acts to put that belief into effect, Tun Razak appointed Arshad Ayub (later Tan Sri) to build up the Mara Institute of Technology and begin the expansion of educational opportunities for the Malays.

Like me, Arshad was a kampung boy transformed by the classroom. He set about his task with gusto, driven by the conviction that his example could be replicated in any number of kampung boys born without the means for personal ambition.

Three decades later, many of them have succeeded. Malaysia has made huge strides in socially-engineered development. But the NEP and its consequent policies in education have been largely about numbers. In our massive push for quantity, we have left quality with some catching up to do.

This catching up was assigned to select residential schools, whose function is to sustain the best and the brightest and separate the wheat from the chaff. So when MCKK boys take up parang (how on earth did they come upon them? In my time, only nail clippers and scissors were allowed) and students from Sekolah Tuanku Abdul Rahman in Ipoh, the first boarding school to be set up after Independence, are dismissed for gang activity, there is more than a sneaking suspicion that education is not being taken seriously enough at the top end of our school system.

I have no doubt that universal education is one of the great accomplishments of the age. But there is a flipside. Schooling has become so commonplace that too many boys and girls, their parents and teachers, reduce it to little more than the chasing of a few grades. Those kicked out of school over the last two weeks for gangsterism and assault were partly compensating for not doing well in class.

Since exams are the *raison d'etre*, pass rates have become the benchmark across the system, from the schoolchildren up to the bureaucrats in the Education Ministry. It is easy to suspect - not just in Malaysia but in the developed countries, even the United Kingdom - that test scores have been ramped up to make everyone look good.

Because school life is turning so monodimensional, it is also easy to suspect that there will be those who won't fit. Such misfits and bad hats pose a constant challenge to liberal educationists everywhere. But the pressure of academic performance and the lack of alternative outlets have left teenage rebellion seeking increasingly violent forms.

In April 1999, two disturbed American schoolkids machine-gunned 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves at the Columbine High School in Ohio. It may be a matter of time before the degree of dysfunction provokes our students to act out their fantasies and frustrations on the basis of Terminator 3. This is why any whiff of violence must be dealt with severely. Teachers must keep an eye out for juvenile rule-breaking, not just exam results.

Indiscipline may well be an inevitable adjunct of mass education, where room is made for every child to enter school. But this should not be the case for residential secondary schools, which are a class apart and whose students have been drafted in by merit.

High-achieving boys and girls who live and learn together should be allowed to develop fraternities and sororities that will last them forever in good stead. But a clear line should be drawn against violence. Ragging - in my day a ritual of inducting juniors to obedience and respect - should be abolished if it permits senior students to take matters into their own hands.

Residential schools are meant to uphold the highest standards of discipline, a key ingredient in both academic results and character-building. This should be the least that is expected of them - they are after all not dealing with learning-impaired holy terrors.

In the country's best schools, gross indiscipline is thus an equally gross dereliction of duty on the part of disciplinary teachers and headmasters.

Whatever happened to the religious lessons they had pumped into their

minds until they were bloated? My simple message to them is: don't allow bad apples to destroy traditions, scholarship and good manners.

Conduct, as the great British educationist and disciplinarian Matthew Arnold once said, is three-fourths of our life and its largest concern.