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Learning from an open secret

THE Prime Minister has hit the nail on the head again when he said that the "secret" of the success of the Chinese people is the value that they place on education. He praised them for their commitment to seek knowledge and education at all costs.

The reason for the academic success of the Chinese is really no "secret" and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in fact reiterating a standard explanation for education excellence - parental involvement and dedication to the pursuit of knowledge.

The educational achievements of the Chinese show that the family plays a central role in children's academic success. It is clear that the Malaysian education system can and does work if the necessary familial and social supports are given to students outside the school.

For the Malaysian education system to succeed, parents and families from all communities must become more dedicated to the education of their children. They must inculcate a respect for education and create an environment conducive to learning in the home so that their children go to school willing and are prepared to study.

Schools, too, must reach out to families and involve them significantly in the education of their children - which means going beyond the annual PTA meetings and the ritual report card day, and include cultural elements that foster excellence.

The values which guide the lives of the Chinese in Malaysia obviously have their roots in the Confucian tradition. The tradition that extols academic achievement is not culturally unique - it is also an Islamic tradition. One must wonder why the Malays are not following Prophet Muhammad's injunction. The acquisition of knowledge should extend from the cradle to the grave. Because this attribute extends beyond a specific culture, it has implications for other communities as well.

They do not need to adopt the complete cultural perspective of the Chinese, or any other culture, to succeed. However, if they are prepared to learn and put into practice those values, behaviours and strategies of the Chinese which have stimulated educational achievement, they too will reap the rewards.