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Warped mindsets in school system

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MALAYSIA is undeniably one, perhaps even the only, country in the world where people of different ethnic groups are able to live, work and socialise together harmoniously and with a degree of tolerance uncommon elsewhere.

But looking through recent newspaper reports, it would seem that this wellspring of tolerance is largely absent in the one place which begs its presence the most - in schools. And this can only bring about future ruin, for schools are places where young minds are moulded and shaped, and characters forged.

Ethnic polarisation in our institutions of learning is far from being a thing of the past, and certain practices and attitudes prevailing in national schools have "scared" away many non-Malay, non-Muslim students, with many opting instead to enrol in the vernacular schools.

As a result, national schools, by Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad's own admission, is becoming "increasingly Malay".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is bent on finding a solution and is heading a high-powered committee formed specially to find ways to do so, used stronger words to describe the increasingly sorry state of the national school system.

He said it had been hijacked by obscurantists interested in Islamic practices that emphasise form over substance. The Prime Minister lamented that even though the system had alienated non-Muslims, some Malays said it was still not Islamic enough.

An example, and a disturbing one at that, was a recent report which revealed that there were teachers who told their students they would not go to heaven if they enrolled in national schools.

To give the Education Ministry credit, it has come up with some measures to attract more Chinese and Indian students to national schools. One, implemented this year in selected schools as a pilot project, is the introduction of a new subject called Bahasa Tambahan, which will allow pupils to learn either Arabic, Mandarin or Tamil.

The subject is part of the school timetable unlike People's Own Language, popularly known as POL classes, which are conducted two hours a week at the request of parents on condition that enrolment is more than 15 students.

Educationists, however, believe it will take more than just Bahasa Tambahan, or integrated classes, or even Vision Schools, to bring the school system back to what it was not too many decades ago.

Nothing short of a complete overhaul of the mindsets of teachers, headmasters and school administrators will work, they say.

For even if 10 or more new subjects, and countless other programmes are introduced, the Chinese and Indian students may likely to steer clear of national schools if existing attitudes permeate and persist. This is, after all, the main reason why they are staying away.

Even those currently within the national school system are none too comfortable.

A Chinese parent was miffed when his daughter was told she need not attend school one day because the school was celebrating Maulidur Rasul.

"The school, a reputable one in Cheras, decided to celebrate Maulidur Rasul on a school day and told its non-Muslim pupils that they should stay home, but that it was compulsory for the Muslims to be there. My daughter

felt truly alienated."

Another parent, Nirmala Naidu, in a letter to the New Straits Times, asked why Muslim and non-Muslim students were greeted separately during assembly.

The greeting went: "Selamat pagi kepada semua yang bukan beragama Islam dan assalamualaikum kepada yang beragama Islam (Good morning to all non-Muslims and assalamualaikum to Muslims)".

This practice is so commonplace now that many parents are unfazed by it, but this does not make it necessarily right.

A Malay student told of her encounter with her ustazah in school who admonished her for wearing shorts and for not wearing a tudung (headscarf). The ustazah allegedly said she would pray for the student to fail in her examinations if she kept on wearing shorts.

These are but several examples. Cases abound of teachers mingling only with those of their own ethnic group, male teachers refusing to shake the hands of their female students, and other attitudes which demonstrate how form - to these teachers and headmasters - is viewed as more important than substance.

But how can mindsets and attitudes be changed? Educationists urge the Ministry to go back to basics: attracting not just a more balanced ethnic mix of teachers but getting better all-round candidates, and re-looking at the entire teacher training process.

Whatever the changes, no one expects them to work overnight. It took time for attitudes to evolve to what they are now, and it will similarly take time to correct.