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Still a popular choice for different reasons

CHINESE parents are motivated by quite different reasons for enrolling their children in vernacular schools. For them, it's mostly because Chinese students generally perform better academically than their national school counterparts and also they want their children to be proficient in Mandarin.

As Universiti Malaya Education Faculty Principals' Institute director Prof Datin Dr Rahimah Ahmad observes: "It's a different reason for the Chinese because the Chinese schools are even more overcrowded and regimented than the national schools.

"A friend of mine went to a national school, but she sent all of her children to Chinese schools because she was afraid that they wouldn't know Mandarin," she says.

Of course, there have also been a few Malay parents who have been motivated by this perceived superiority of Chinese medium education to place their children in Chinese schools.

Needless to say, China's re-emergence as an economic powerhouse has given added impetus to the preference for Chinese medium schools as it enhances the economic value of the Chinese language.

The regard that the Chinese have for their linguistic heritage is shared by the Tamils.

Malaysian Indian Congress education committee chairman Senator Prof Datuk Dr T. Marimuthu says:

"Both Chinese and Tamil parents send their children to vernacular schools because language has always been an important consideration.

"They want their children to understand their culture and language is the vehicle for culture.

"As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says, there were provisions for the teaching of Chinese and Tamil but that was not properly done.

"They asked for a minimum of 15 students before POL (Pupil's Own Language) classes could be organised. They were often organised late, sometimes starting only in March or April and were the first to go when there was a lack of funds."

However, Marimuthu also hastens to add that the Education Ministry deserves to be congratulated for introducing Arabic, Mandarin and Tamil at the primary level.

National Union of the Teaching Profession president Tengku Habsah Tengku Petera says the teaching of Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic should also be extended to the secondary and tertiary levels.

She also feels that students should be given the opportunity to learn the mother tongues of other communities.

The education system should be made more flexible to allow Chinese students, for example, to study Tamil or Arabic if they want to do so, she says.

She also suggests that the rules be relaxed to allow language and Islamic teachers to be recruited from outside the school system if there aren't enough teaching staff who are proficient in these subjects.

And, as for concerns about the supposed declining standard of national schools, Marimuthu suggests that studies be carried out on "good" schools to find out why they perform better.

"Let's study the effective schools. I am not just referring to schools

that achieve good grades, but schools that are churning out all-round individuals that excel in all academic and extra-curricular activities," he says,

He says lessons that are learned from these schools can be used to improve the performance of other schools.

Of course, accessibility is another major factor that comes into consideration when parents decide whether to send their children to national schools or not.

Most Tamil schools, notes Marimuthu, are located in the plantations and as plantation workers are invariably poor, they simply can't send their children to a national school even if they wanted to do so because they can't afford the transportation cost.

Marimuthu says many non-Malays feel alienated in national schools and notes that the newspapers have carried articles about schools forcing non-Malay students to wear baju kurung and tudung.

"As the Prime Minister has rightly pointed out, it is the heightening of Islamic values and neglecting other values that alienate the non-Malay children."

"To quote PM, 'our national schools have become Malay Islamic schools'. There is some evidence to show that this is happening.

"Islamic education is in the national curriculum, but non-Malay children have to do Civics and that is not well-taught.

"The question is whether national schools are secular or Islamic schools. There is already provision for Islamic education in national schools, but they are not Islamic schools. They are secular schools," he adds.

Marimuthu says he has received many complaints from parents about racial slurs and victimisation of Indian students in national schools.

"There have been complaints about baju kurung being made compulsory, religious teachers telling Malay students not to send Chinese New Year and Christmas greeting cards, teaching staff telling students not to elect non-Malays as chairmen of clubs.

"Maybe, these incidents are one-off cases but I'm afraid that it may be the tip of the iceberg," he adds.

Habsah says the Government's plan to recruit teaching staff of all races in primary and secondary schools would go a long way to reduce this sense of alienation and make national schools more appealing to the minority races.

Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin has been reported as saying that the ministry is looking into the possibility of paying better wages to teachers.

He says the ministry will also direct the selection boards of teachers' training colleges to ensure that there is more a balanced mix of races among aspiring candidates.

"Currently, Chinese and Indian parents tend not to want to send their children to national schools as they say they hardly see any Chinese or Indian teachers there. This is sad," he adds.