

Education is about having a choice

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COMMENT In the raging controversy over the continuance of the PPSMI (Teaching of Science and Maths in English) option, there seems to be at least two main arguments put forward for not allowing it, namely, (i) it is too troublesome to have two options in the same school; and (ii) English is not the mother tongue of Malaysians.

I believe that choice and flexibility must be a fundamental principle in education policy and that we should take a historical perspective of the development of our present situation.

First, we should be thankful that the right to mother-tongue education and the fact that every child learns best in the mother tongue is a principle that has been established in Unesco and is now widely accepted in our country.

NONEMother-tongue education in Malay, Chinese and Tamil in our country has seen a staggered progress. Chinese-language schools have existed in this country for more than 200 years. Indeed, the first Chinese school was set up in 1819.

Tamil schools have also had a long history and they developed mainly through community support during the colonial period. Thus, at Independence, there were already 1,350 Chinese primary schools and 78 Chinese secondary schools, while Tamil primary schools numbered more than 800 in 1957.

Under colonial rule, Malay vernacular schools were built, but they were certainly insufficient. During the colonial era, Lim Lian Geok, the 'Soul of the Malaysian Chinese' never failed to encourage the Malay community to call for development of Malay mother-tongue education up to secondary level.

That was why Utusan Melayu asked Lim Lian Geok to write a column in their newspaper during Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

The English-language schools were, of course, the preferred system by the colonial power and they enrolled the elite and the middle class, although theoretically they were open to all. Certainly there were also children from poorer classes in the English-medium government schools I studied at in the 50s and 60s.

Mother tongue of the middle-class

As a result of this history, English language can now be considered the mother tongue of these middle-class Malaysians, where English is the 'family language' with which children communicate with their parents.

We should appreciate that colonial societies like ours (including India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Kenya and other former British colonies) have this peculiarity and that we acknowledge and respect this reality.

NONERight up to the 1961 Education Act, the school-leaving certificate for the Chinese-language 'secondary' schools was a government-administered examination.

Our education system managed well and you did not hear any grumbles about how "troublesome" it was to have that provision. We had inherited that system from our specific history and it served the purpose of providing mother-tongue education for students in these schools.

The Education Act 1961 did away with the Chinese-language secondary schools and they were then forced to become "independent", which meant they had to be supported by the community. After that, the government only provided teachers and some financial support for Chinese language 'primary' schools.

Is it "troublesome" to ask for the reinstatement of the Chinese-language secondary schools into the national system? Ever since 1975, the Chinese community has administered the Unified Examination Certificate of the 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools, which have a total enrolment of some 60,000 students.

Tuition fees are a burden for the many parents who choose this educational route for their children and the Chinese community has been subsidising these schools since 1961. It is like paying double taxation.

A breach in the national language policy

The former 'government English schools' had to convert to teaching in Bahasa Malaysia when the national language policy was implemented after 1969. Any protests were muted in the aftermath of the May 13 racial riots and under the assertive Malay-centric ideology of the new ruling class.

And so this system of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction has been implemented with no leeway for dissent for at least three decades. Then nine years ago, Dr Mahathir Mohamad decided to implement the PPSMI.

PPSMI has provided the precedent for this breach in the national language policy. The justification was that it was the only way to master the international language, English.

NONE If we bear in mind all the arguments used by the Mahathir administration to justify PPSMI, we really cannot fault Page (Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia) for asking for the choice of having PPSMI for their children using the same arguments. Sorry, the government cannot have its cake and eat it!

Is having a choice of PPSMI 'troublesome'?

Some opponents of Page's demand have said that having two medium for teaching Maths and Science in the same school is too "troublesome" and unreasonable to impose on the government. I beg to differ.

Education is about having a choice. I remember when my eldest brother was in secondary school during the 60s, he was very focused about choosing Arts subjects even though he was in the top class made up of mainly Science students. He stood his ground against the school administration.

NONEMy parents did not even come into the picture. Then, my second brother refused to do Additional Maths even though he was in the top Science class because he was focused on doing medicine later on. Again, he was adamant about his choice and the school administration had to give in.

I made the same choice as my brother and did not choose Additional Maths, even though the school administration wanted uniformity.

The principle we were fighting for was choice and flexibility. At the time, we simply could not see why it should be "troublesome" to have that choice.

If it is troublesome to have the choice of Maths and Science in English, what about the choice of having "pupils' own language" in Chinese or Tamil or Kadazan or Bidayuh, etc?

Need to broaden choices

Although I do not agree with the pedagogical wisdom of this, some students of independent Chinese secondary schools even have the choice of doing the SPM (in Malay) during their fifth year, the UEC (in Chinese) and A levels (in English) in their final year! It is not considered "troublesome" for these schools.

It is not as if Malaysians are asking for something so difficult to implement. Our national education system has had a long history of English-language teaching and we have just had nine fresh years of PPSMI, so teachers and resources are not a problem.

NONE Our education system should be looking at broadening the choices to cope with mother-tongue instruction for our indigenous people; special education to cope with slow learners, autistic and disabled children.

I remember when my wife had to write the answers for a child with muscular problems who was sitting for his O Levels at the British Council. Another sightless friend of ours told us about how computer programmes were being developed to enable people in her situation to follow lectures online.

"Troublesome" seems to be the hardest word in our education vocabulary.

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