

Improve vernacular school syllabus, not abolish system – panelists

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Critics of the vernacular school system have looked at Singapore and Indonesia's success in abolishing "segregation" based on languages, while others argued that Malaysia's neighbours had adopted "authoritarian tactics" to achieve assimilation.

Six panellists in the third episode of KiniTV's "Lapang Dada" talk show shared their views on what is often regarded as a polarising issue - whether vernacular schools foster division or enhance cultural understanding.

Social activist Ooi Kok Hin said single-stream education is just one social factor, citing Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's move to not only abolish vernacular schools but also impose other measures intended to be rid of segregation at various levels.

"He (Lee) decided 'Okay, this is the direction we want to head' and so he did it.

"He did not only abolish vernacular schools, he actually forced people from various races to live together in public housing.

“If we just take one aspect, which is the school. If today the Education Ministry decided to abolish vernacular schools, will the mastery of Bahasa Melayu improve by tomorrow?” Ooi questioned.

Improvements, if any, will be “marginal”, he said, as students will return home to speak their mother tongue, while other larger aspects of society including race-based political parties will also remain.

New Era University College assistant professor Joe Liaw Siau Chi noted how Singapore’s system had fostered a national identity at the expense of individual cultural backgrounds.

“This is what my Singaporean friends told me, they felt less Chinese or Malay but have a clear Singapore identity,” he said.

Echoing Ooi’s view, Malaysiakini sub-editor G Vinod said many outside of Singapore were unaware of objections raised against Lee, particularly with heavy restrictions on the media.

“So in that context, I can say that Malaysia is more democratic in adapting our education system for all segments of society, unlike in Singapore,” he added.

Learning beyond classroom

Two other panellists, teacher Pingalan Gejandran and RTM Mandarin news reader Rasyidah Abu Johan, argued for vernacular schools to be retained but with improvements made to the school syllabus.

Pingalan said additional topics that foster unity among races can be introduced in subjects including History and Civics.

Rasyidah, meanwhile, said mastery of languages is not only something taught in school but parents also have a role in educating their children.

On the impact of vernacular schools on national unity, Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Sememnanjung (GPMS) activist Mohamad Danish Shahmi countered Rasyidah's view on learning languages, citing that the system contributed to lower proficiency in the national language.

"It has an impact because many (from vernacular schools) are not proficient in the national language.

"If we're not proficient, how can we claim to be a Malaysian because the national language is enshrined under the Federal Constitution," he stressed.

Nationalism and social division

While admitting that vernacular schools could have a minor impact on integration, Vinod argued it does not reflect an individual's sense of nationalism.

"To say they don't have a nationalistic spirit, not very Malaysian, that's a definite no," he said.

Ooi also stressed how speaking one common language will not solve the issue of societal division, citing the situation in America where racial division continues despite every person speaking English.

Other issues raised in the hour-long session included questions surrounding quotas in education, as well as improving national schools to attract more students from different ethnicities.

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