

## **Single stream schools a thorny issue**

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Two weeks ago, the single stream school idea was mooted by the historian and academician Professor Emeritus Khoo Kay Kim. As expected, there were mixed reactions when it comes to what is best for Malaysian children.

According to Prof Khoo, a single stream system is crucial for the unity of Malaysia.

He also pointed out that the relationship between students of different races in universities is very poor; in fact it seems they cannot even stand to be in the same room with each other.

"This is because they are not used to one another and they cannot relate to each other as they have been physically separated since they were young."

However, Tan Yew Sing who is the Chairman of the KL and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCAH) said that we could promote unity by encouraging interactions between students of different ethnic groups in extra-curricular activities like sports.

"Although they are of a different race, they could interact with each other if they have a common interest.

"This is a more effective way to create bond among the students," he explained.

This view is not shared by Prof. Khoo, who then asked, "Can you imagine the tension when there is a football match between a Chinese and a Malay school?"

### **Eradicate race-based politics**

Meanwhile, political scientist Mohammad Agus Yusoff feels strongly that by implementing the single stream school system, unity can be forged among the races and people of different races will feel that they belong in Malaysia.

Ultimately, he said our identity as Malaysians will be entrenched and such an education system will even help us to move away from race-based politics.

"The single school stream system will enable our children to see beyond race," he said.

"The world is moving towards diversity, and we should value our multi ethnic (diversity) and language traits as our asset and use it as our strength," Tan said.

Agus, on the other hand, believes that students who study together should also learn each other's languages and therefore, be able to appreciate each other's culture as well.

"We are celebrating different festivals in Malaysia, but we might not understand the significance behind it," he said.

### **Improve on the current system**

According to Tan, the best way to go about this is by making sure the education system is

unified and that students from different streams are learning the same content.

"This way we can retain the beauty of multilingual Malaysians while (being) able to incite nationalism and patriotism among the new generation," he explained.

However, when asked whether the government should open the intake to MARA science schools and UiTM, Agus said that those are *bumiputera* special privileges.

"Perhaps we can change that once we have implemented the single stream school and racial quotas in schools will no longer be necessary," he adds.

### **Freedom of Choice**

Dr Chua Yee Yen, the Honorary Secretary-General from the Hua Zong (Federation of Chinese Associations of Malaysia) said that parents should have the option of sending their children to any school they choose.

"In fact, this freedom of choice is given to non-Chinese as well, as many Malays, Indians and even *orang asli* are sending their children to Chinese schools now," he said.

He further clarified that Chinese schools have existed since 200 years ago and the Chinese educationists would like to retain the system as it has been proven successful.

### **Want the best for our children**

Agus said that to implement the single school system, we should also look into revamping the current national schools.

He suggested that the government increase the level of professionalism among its teachers; equip schools with better technology and facilities, and stop putting political elements into the education system.

"We should learn from Singapore's education system. It is an example of a single stream system that is functioning well," Prof Khoo said when asked about how we can implement the system.

He says that the official language is English in Singapore, but all students are required to study their ethnic language.

### **We want unity**

At the end of the day, whether they are opposing or supporting the single stream school system, one thing is consistent - all parties want unity among the races.

To the Chinese educationists, they feel that a more conducive and fair environment has to exist first, before a single stream school can be implemented in a fair manner.

"The social engineering should be done delicately and we need to respect the feedback from all races and quarters," said Tan.

And for the single stream school supporters, this is the time to change as this issue has been debated on for far too long.

Agus said, "we have to start somewhere".

"I am so sick of just talking about it and this is indeed a good time to start," he further added.

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