

## **COMMENT: 'Ideal' schools face multi-culturalism woe**

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Jan 22: The introduction of Mandarin and Tamil in schools nationwide has been delayed by a shortage of teachers. The bigger hurdle to the Government's noble effort to make national schools more appealing to all races will be to overcome entrenched stereotypes about what multi-culturalism should mean in Malaysia, writes ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD.

IS it possible to build a school that can truly unite multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia while catering to its diversity?

Such a school would have to offer a single national curriculum. But it would also have to be one where Chinese pupils could learn Mandarin; Indians, Tamil; and Malays could delve into Arabic, learn Jawi and gain in-depth knowledge about Islam. And where any one of them could study each other's languages out of interest.

This "ideal" Malaysian school is what the Government is trying to establish.

It is attempting this through a move to empower the 5,789 national schools nationwide (See box).

They are to be moulded into the school of choice and promoted as the best medium to foster greater tolerance and understanding.

But some things are easier in theory than in practice.

Some of the proposals to make national schools more popular are going smoothly, such as the introduction of JQAF (Jawi, al-Quran, Arabic and fardhu ain) for Muslims.

The subject was introduced in stages last year and will be taught in over 1,235 schools this year.

But the introduction of Mandarin and Tamil has hit a snag. It may well prove to be the trickiest measure to accomplish.

Last year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced the introduction of the two languages as electives.

The programme was supposed to have been implemented in stages this year, but the roll-out has been delayed and scaled back.

The syllabus is being tweaked, and a pilot project involving selected schools will only begin next year. The earliest date for full implementation is 2008.

No reason has been given for the delay. Ministry officials have declined to comment, but earlier reports quoted sources citing teacher shortage.

Is this really the case?

"I don't think so. The Government has various options to secure the teachers needed," said Lok Yim Pheng, secretary-general of the National Union of the Teaching Profession.

MCA education bureau chairman Senator Lee Sing Chooi offered some suggestions:

The first is to rope in unemployed graduates; the second is to hire foreign teachers from China and India; the third is to employ Malaysian graduates from Chinese or Taiwanese universities; and the fourth is to train those who studied in our independent Chinese schools.

"Getting the teachers should not be a problem. There are many ways we can overcome a shortage."

Resolving the teacher shortage could be the easy part in making national schools attractive to all races.

A larger problem is the potential ethnic and political sensitivities about multi-culturalism in Malaysia.

Tan Sri Murad Mohamad Noor, a former director-general of education, cited one recent example of a well-meaning initiative embroiled in controversy, a fate he worries could also befall the Mandarin and Tamil initiative.

When the Government announced a switch from Bahasa Malaysia to English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science, some protested, claiming that the policy ran counter to the interests of their particular community.

"The debate over the language switch became politicised. You had groups making all sorts of demands, putting the Government in a spot.

"That was unfortunate, but that is what often happens. Issues relating to language and education often end up being hijacked," said Murad.

He now heads a committee of education experts set up by the Government to study how national schools can be made more attractive.

Another hurdle is changing entrenched attitudes about what the national school system in Malaysia is all about.

Many principals and teachers believe national schools should reflect the diversity of their pupils, yet some introduce Islamic and Malay practices into their schools.

One reason why non-Muslim parents are not eager to send their children to national schools is because these practices create an atmosphere that leaves them uncomfortable.

They include reciting doa (supplications) in some school assemblies and mandating the wearing of baju kurung for all female pupils on Fridays in some schools — indicating low awareness of the sensitivities of non-Muslims.

Murad said some national schools, especially those in rural areas, put too heavy an emphasis on "Malayness" because teachers and staff feel they have to cater to the demands of society.

"They forget that rapid urbanisation is changing the landscape of society. Schools need to reflect this but, unfortunately, the general atmosphere in some national schools leaves

much to be desired."

As Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris Associate Professor Dr N.S. Rajendran puts it, teacher training institutes "are not doing enough to train our teachers across the board in terms of our multi-cultural education and how to handle students of multi-cultural backgrounds".

He referred to the 1956 Razak Report on Education, which clearly stated the need to foster multi-culturalism in schools.

"The policy on multi-culturalism was very clearly stated from the beginning, but even now, our teachers are not prepared," he adds.

Changing entrenched attitudes not only takes time, but also has to happen at the right level.

"Policy-makers can talk all day about the importance of fostering greater multi-culturalism, but at the end of the day, that change needs to happen at the school level, because it is the teachers who will make all the difference."

Murad said any debate over the introduction of Mandarin and Tamil must keep in mind the programme's ultimate aim: to prepare Malaysia's younger generation for a rapidly changing future.

"Some argue that we have fine outstanding citizens who were products of the present school set-up, so why change anything?"

"That may be true, but we must also ask ourselves whether our present school system is able to prepare our children for the future," Murad added.

Ultimately, yes, this is how the initiative to teach Mandarin and Tamil in national schools should be seen.

"It must be about giving non-Malay pupils an opportunity to learn their native language," said Dr Rajendran. "It should be about providing an opportunity for pupils to learn to respect each other.

"It is important that the two elective subjects be promoted not only among Chinese and Indian pupils but among all pupils in national schools.

"Our dream is to see national schools with a Malay teacher teaching Tamil and an Indian teacher teaching Mandarin. "That would greatly reflect what being multicultural in this country is about."

Unfortunately, the only thing standing in the way of achieving this goal is the pockets of narrow-mindedness about what multi-culturalism means for Malaysia.

Source:

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