

I truly believe the spirit of multi-racialism is very much alive in our schools

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COMMENT

By Hishammuddin
Hussein



PERHAPS the only thing that has remained constant since my primary schooldays has been my grin. Everything else seems to have changed.

I remember a time of blue school shorts and even shorter physical education shorts.

Better still, I remember a time of teachers wearing mini-skirts and sporting beehive hairdos.

Then, it was all paper and pencil, blackboard and chalk.

My chair was wooden and woefully uncomfortable. But from that chair, I listened and watched and learned.

I listened in fascination as my teachers taught me new things, watched in awe as they showed me wisdom, and I strove to learn as they guided my thinking processes, and eventually made me what I am today.

These days, by the grace of God, I sit in a most comfortable high back leather chair in a fully-carpeted office filled with cooled air.

I no longer wear short blue shorts and I haven't picked up a piece of chalk in years.

But I still look on in fascination as I observe teachers teaching their students new things, showing them wisdom, guiding their thinking processes and working their hardest and trying their utmost to make good of our children.

I am in a position today where it is no longer just one school that I have to care about, five teachers I have to please and 40 students that I know.

Today, the responsibility that has been entrusted upon me covers some 10,000 schools, 300,000-odd teachers and some five million students.

Yes, our education system has grown.

And yes, along with this growth have come numerous challenges, constant criticism, endless complaints, divergent viewpoints, intense scrutiny and, unfortunately, little praise.

When we talk about such a mammoth institution as our national education system, it

of course becomes an impossibility for me, my officers, my teachers or my advisers to please everyone.

But praise is not what we are here for.

Our school system consists of a myriad of types of schools.

We have the national schools, which utilise Bahasa Malaysia as the main medi-

um; we have national-type schools, which use either Mandarin or Tamil as their medium; and we also have national religious schools.

Today, our national primary schools number 5,761, while our secondary national schools number 1,823.

They cater to roughly 76 per cent and 90 per cent of our primary and secondary student population respectively.

To say national schools play a vital role in the country's development would be a gross understatement.

They are, indeed, the catalyst of the nation's development.

Many of the old school will

say today's national schools cannot hold a candle to those of the old days. This has been a growing perception, real or otherwise, especially in the last 10 years or so.

Having to grapple with a myriad of issues, ranging from overcrowding to allegations of racism, the ministry's task has become increasingly difficult and daunting over the years.

This year, we celebrate our 50th Merdeka anniversary and more than ever, the national education system is again under the microscope.

I won't fool myself, or anyone, by saying we have a perfect system.

I will be the first to admit that there are many problems and issues that need our attention and need to be discussed and, hopefully, resolved at the earliest date.

But when one looks back over the 50 years, it cannot be denied that the national education system has grown in tandem with the country.

We have changed, admittedly not always smoothly.

But more often than not, the change has brought about more benefits to our students.

Because our growth has been so rapid and intense, we sometimes forget that what we were dealing with in the past, what we had to grapple with, has changed just as fast and as radically.

What we sometimes fail to realise is that in these past 50 years, education has spread so much.

It is no longer the purview of the rich and privileged; it is now the domain of all.

Those who throw the accusation that our national schools have become overwhelmingly Malay forget that

this is a natural consequence as the Malay student population has increased dramatically from the days of early independence.

In areas which have a large Malay population, it is only to be expected that the student population in those schools will be largely Malay.

But the figures also show that in areas heavily populated by non-Malays, some national schools have a 100 per cent non-Malay student population.

SK Guru Kalgidhar in Ipoh, SK Tambisan in Sandakan and SK Tanjung Manawali in Kudat all have 100 per cent non-Malay student populations.

SK Lamdin in Alor Star, SK Sandau in Lahad Datu, SK Kg Titingan in Tawau, SK Pulau Gaya in Kota Kinabalu, SK Ledang Pedas in Gelang Patah and SK Buntong in Ipoh all have non-Malay student populations of over 90 per cent.

In many rural areas in the peninsula, schools are heavily populated with Malay students as is to be expected.

But where the racial ratio is more balanced in the urban areas, the student population in the national schools is reflective of this.

This is the case with SK Taman Kepong in Kuala Lumpur, SK Taman Megah in Petaling Jaya, SK Dato' Panglima Kinta in Ipoh, SK Tanjung Medang in Pekan, SK Taman Rasah Jaya in Seremban and SK Sungai Nyior in Butterworth.

All these schools have a non-Malay student population of over 50 per cent.

As Minister of Education, I have had the opportunity to visit many schools all over the country.

From what I see and from what I hear, I still truly believe the spirit of multi-racialism is very much alive in our schools.

Yes, we do hear of the loud complaints from parents from time to time that their children are being picked on because of their race or their attire or even their refusal to don certain apparel.

These are real cases that need to be dealt with firmly.

No matter how hard we try, there will always be cases such as these.

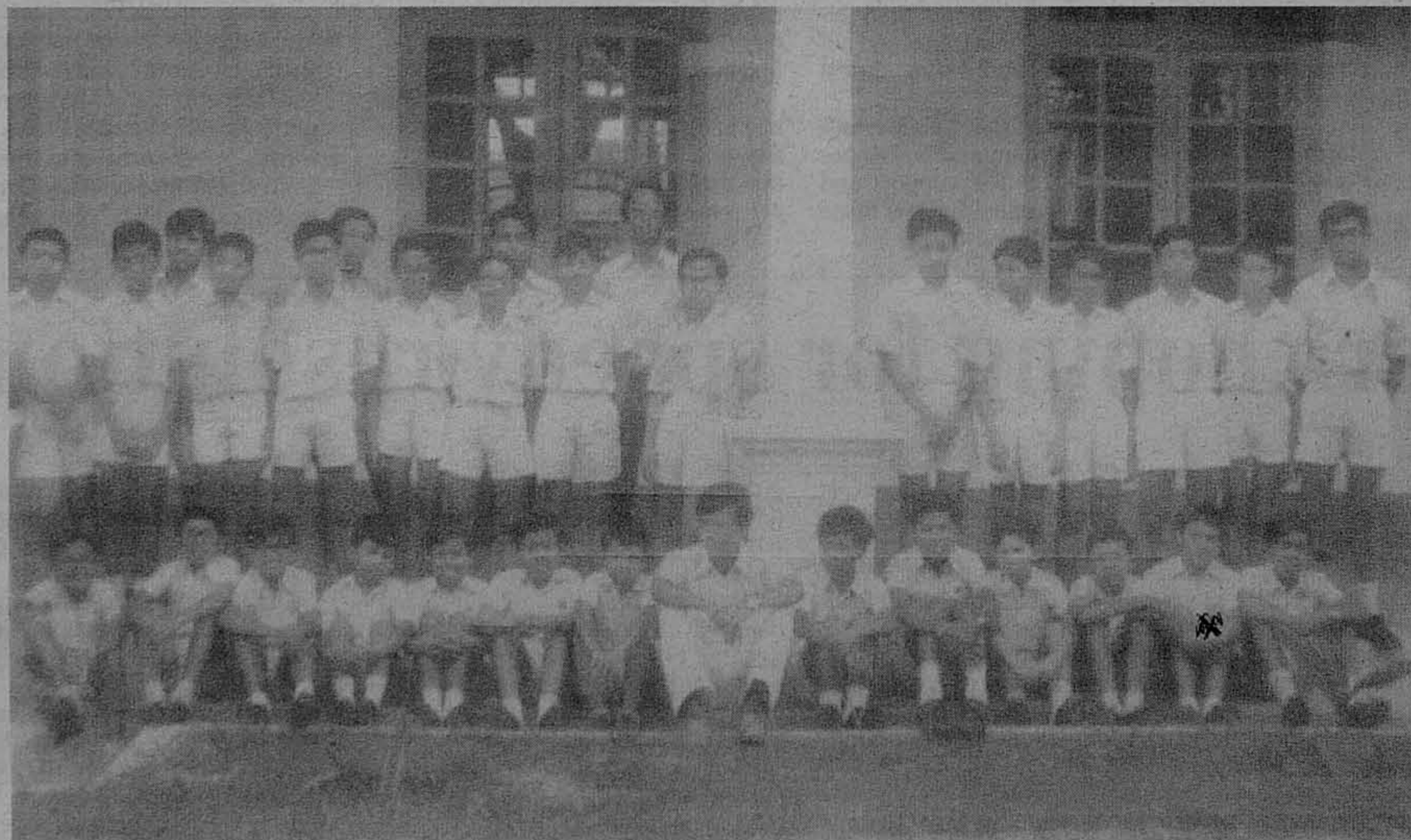
Unfortunately, attention will always be given to negatives more than the positives.

In the midst of finding the wrongs, we sometimes tend to miss the rights.

What of those stories of great friendships between Indians, Malays and Chinese that were forged in school?

How about the inspiring stories of teachers of one race going out of their way to bring out the best in a student of another race?

What of parents of children



When boys wore shorts and were proud of it. Hishammuddin Hussein (seated second from right) in a class photo from his days at Malay College Kuala Kangsar.



Speaking of short shorts and mini skirts, Hishammuddin and his sister, (Dr) Rozita Halina, with their mother, Tun Suhailah Tan Sri Noah.

of different races working together for the sake of the school?

I am a product of a national school. It was at school that I learnt about the different people of Malaysia and their different ways.

I still remember and maintain my friendships with those boys from very different backgrounds, which were all cultivated in St John's Institution.

Surely, there are more of such stories than they are of the less generous type.

Maybe feel-good stories don't make for good conversation.

More likely, it is our human nature where we prefer to highlight the negatives rather than work on the positives.

My point is that we at the ministry do truly believe that our national schools have been, are and will continue to be the main melting pot of our nation.

It is where our children first learn of others, it is where they learn about the differences between us and, most importantly, it is where they learn to respect these very different traits among us.

This year, we launched our Educational Development Master Plan.

The very first thrust of the plan, and intentionally so, is the development of a Negara

Bangsa.

This process is vital for a multi-racial, multi-religious country such as Malaysia.

It is also very apt that this year, as we go into our 50th Merdeka celebrations, schools have to continue to be the main arena where our children learn about living in a multi-racial and multi-religious country.

Schools also have to be the arena where we instil in our children a sense of patriotism and the pride of being Malaysian.

Which other institution in the country offers us this opportunity of planting these seeds in our children if not our national schools?

From the day we gained independence 50 years ago till today, the national school has played the role of bringing our nation together.

The national school has offered the opportunity for us to come together — it is the purview of each and every single child in Malaysia, irrespective of race or religion.

That is the true beauty of the national school.

That was the role that was played by our very first national schools, and that is the role that the 5,761 national primary schools continue to play.

From school sports to uniformed bodies, all national school activities are aimed at

fostering closer ties between the races so that we can learn to live with one another.

These days, the ministry is also working on providing Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic lessons to students in national schools.

So far, 150 national primary schools already provide Mandarin lessons, while 71 offer Tamil.

The beauty is that upon closer study, it is not only the Chinese students who are taking up Mandarin, or Indian students who are learning Tamil.

In SK Sanglang in Perlis, 22 of the 23 students taking Mandarin lessons are Malays and the other is an Indian.

In SK Sultanah Asma in Alor Star, all 29 students taking Mandarin are Malay!

As for Tamil, three of the 24 students taking Tamil lessons in SK Iskandar in Alor Star are Malay, while in SK Kebun Sireh in Bukit Mertajam, 10 of the 16 students studying Tamil are Malay.

I read these statistics and I write these statistics with satisfaction and pride.

It makes me believe that our national schools are fulfilling an important agenda.

And it makes me hope that our national schools will continue to fulfil this agenda in the future.

So, as we celebrate our 50 years of independence, I appeal to the officials, the parents, the teachers, the students and the public to come together to help bring our national schools to a higher level.

There is still much to be achieved. We would like to see more parents take an interest in the schools.

We would like to see teachers play their role with pride.

We would like to see students enjoying and revelling in their schooling days.

And most of all, we would like to see the officials themselves strive to bring about better management and infrastructure in our national schools.

I believe that everybody has a role to play in education. Education is the responsibility of all and the development of our education system and our national schools should be seen as a national agenda. There are no two ways about it.

So I was wrong. My grin has not been the only constant.

In effect, our national schools have remained constant.

The methods and surroundings may have changed, but the core of our national schools remains.

■ **Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein is the Minister of Education**