

# Education plan must end race divide in schools

The Sun - 12/2/2009

Comment by **B.A. Hamzah**

ON the occasion of the prime minister's recent unveiling of the National Education Blueprint (2006-2010), we need to ponder whether our current education policy has the capacity to end racial segregation in schools. The hypothesis is: when schools fail to promote values for national unity, nation-building in a multicultural diversity is at tremendous risk.

The evidence of racial segregation in schools is overwhelming.

Of 3.1 million students in primary schools, 76.3% are in *sekolah kebangsaan* (national schools), 20.6% in Chinese schools and 3.1% in Tamil schools.

Of the students in national schools, 95% are bumiputra and the rest non-bumiputra. Some 95% of non-bumiputra (primarily Chinese) students attend the Chinese schools. The racial balance in Tamil schools is most skewed: non-bumiputra (primarily Indians) constitute 99.7%.

Recently, a colleague sent me a short article (written in 1948) by the late Rev Martin Luther King Jr on education. Racial segregation in American schools, according to King, had deleterious consequences on national unity. King's observations have a bearing on our education system.

King warns that "if we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts". Of course, King was concerned with racial politics in the US education system to perpetuate dominance of white rule and an education policy that paid only lip service to multiculturalism.

Today, Americans pay tribute to King for ending racial segregation in schools that effectively put an end to apartheid in America. King's role in reforming US education deserves our recognition.

King was extremely critical of American schools during his time. He criticised an education policy that served to equip elites with the instruments of exploitation "so that they can trample over the masses".

Embedded in his thoughts was the use of education at public expense to exploit the working class, mainly blacks, to promote a political agenda. In hindsight, this agenda could continue forever if the curriculum was not revised to address the larger attributes of education such as teaching a person "to think intensively and critically" and to remove racial prejudices.

King argued in *The Purpose of Education* (1948) that the educated class in America then was so racist, it neglected the real purpose of education. To King, education must serve two functions: utility and culture "in the life of man and in society". In essence, he says "education must enable a man to become more efficient" in the conduct of his daily life and should contribute to his cultural well-being. According to him, an education system which fails to make a person think incisively and critically will undermine nation-building efforts.

There is an inherent danger that our education policy will lead us to the situation most dreaded by King in 1948, if school curricula should continue to furnish the interests of elites "with noble ends rather than means to an end".

An educated person, according to King, is one who can think logically and scientifically. King cites a white man who, in his view by the standard of his time, was a very educated person as he "could think critically and intensively" but was extremely racist. In his view, a person with such prejudices cannot be called educated.

King, who was famous for his *I have a dream* slogan, had used education to rally Americans towards a national reconciliation agenda based on equity and social justice. By focusing on education "that enables one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from fiction", King succeeded in bringing about the emancipation of his

suppressed community by personal sacrifices and effective and resolute leadership.

His personal crusade against bigotry in the US education system earned him a permanent place in the history of America but it cost him his life. Jan 15 is Remembrance Day for Martin Luther King Jr and a public holiday in the US.

King reminds the intelligentsia that "intelligence is not enough". He maintains that the goal of true education is to produce persons with intelligence and character. It is character that differentiates good leaders from bad ones. According to King, "the most gifted criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morality".

As we rush to build new schools and rename colleges as universities, we need to pay more attention to "character building" and national unity in schools.

King cites a white man who, in his view by the standard of his time, was a very educated person as he 'could think critically and intensively' but was extremely racist. In his view, a person with such prejudices cannot be called educated."

King laments further: "I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do

not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education."

The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that we are not going to stay where we are. Hopefully, the publication of the latest National Education Blueprint will restore scholarship to schools and further enhance stakeholders' confidence in the ability of our education system, among others, to promote national unity.

The surest way to destroy the nation is to play politics with its education system.

*The writer is a student of politics, international law and education. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com*