

Integration must come from the top

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NST-6/5/2007

Q: Why are we still taking about national integration? Haven't we achieved it?

A: In the 1970s and 1980s, people were very sensitive about integration. People of any race could sit together. There was the opportunity to mix around.

But now, even in Kuala Lumpur, certain groups of people prefer to stay in certain areas and send their children to certain schools.

On top of that, there is very little opportunity for mixing. Everyone is so busy concentrating on work. Adults don't even have time to integrate themselves, so how are they supposed to teach their children?

People in the city don't even know their neighbours.

Sometimes when an accident happens, people always ask: "Is it a Malay?" or "Is it a Chinese?"

Why should we have this type of perceptions? The minute anything happens, people always ask for the race (of the person involved).

We need to change this mindset. It creates a divide as, indirectly, people think differently already.

Q: What needs to be done?

A: National integration should not just be talk; it must be action, too. You have to do it.

Q: But there are allegations that schools these days are predominantly single race. How do we integrate then?

A: The Education Department must create an opportunity for children of different races to mix. Perhaps by having integration programmes.

Pupils have to be exposed to other races. So, from time to time, a school must create an opportunity for pupils to meet other races. It must organise something to bring the races together, perhaps visits to other schools.

Q: But teachers are also accused of being

insensitive to integration?

A: Integration must come from the top.

More than anything else, the school head plays an important role.

If the head teacher is conscious of the importance of national integration, then it is possible to build an integrated community within the school.

Once the head starts the ball rolling, other teachers will follow suit.

For instance, if the head finds one teacher is biased, he or she must haul up the teacher and correct the bias. Then only will the teacher realise that it is wrong.

For instance, while staging a school concert, we should not let teachers appoint pupils from only one group.

In a multicultural school, if pupils of different races fight, then the school authority must not be biased.

In some feedback I got, there are some schools that have "unwritten rules" where certain children are put in only certain classes. Why is this happening?

Teachers must be sensitive about national integration.

They must try to get a balance and give opportunities to everybody.

But to have all this takes training — people have to accept the idea, and then do it.

Q: Is integration only the responsibility of schools?

A: It is more important to start with adults first. Adults must be integrated, then only can they teach the young.

Parents must teach their children not to be prejudiced.

It's no good teachers teaching children about integration if all the work is undone by the parents when the child goes home.

What is important is to respect and understand one another. The respect and understanding has to come from the heart.

Integration cannot work overnight, but I believe that it can work.

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