

The problem lies with national schools

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Some national schools have long waiting lists as they are perceived as being better than the rest.

IT is something parents think about even before their child is thrust screeching and wailing into the world. For those who want only the very best for their rambunctious bundles of joy (or torment, depending on the time of day or month), this decision necessitates a voyage of contemplative self-discovery and soul-searching.

It is not an issue that touches on matters transcendental, philosophical, or even spiritual. Rather, it is a mundane rite of passage every parent has to go through — deciding which type of school they should subject the precious product of their union: national or vernacular?

That Malaysia has more than one school system makes a decision necessary before the child reaches 7 years of age. Those with the means take the easier route and send their children to private or international schools, where the quality of education is perceived to be (and, most times, is) far superior.

For those less blessed financially, it is either “sekolah kebangsaan” (national schools) or “sekolah jenis kebangsaan” (national-type schools). Increasingly, and for a variety of reasons, many non-Malay parents are sending their children to the latter.

National schools have, as a result, become very Malay in composition. This does not bode well for national unity. Without the opportunity to interact with those of different racial and cultural backgrounds in their formative years, children — who are essentially colour-blind — will more readily form misconceptions about those not like them as they grow up.

The simplest solution would be to eliminate all school systems save one, as some have proposed. Some politicians have called for a single school system to check racial polarisation. Recently, a similar campaign was launched in the blogosphere.

The argument for a single school system sounds persuasive, even logical. Such a system would eradicate anguished hand-wringing on the part of parents, and address longstanding issues of national unity and integration in education.

However, there are impediments other than merely the Education Act 1996, which guarantees a place for Chinese and Tamil schools in the national education system. The main obstacle is the nation’s present socio-political realities, which render the idea not just impractical but impossible.

As it is, even talking about it can inflame emotions and elicit threats of police reports and charges of sedition. Would it be prudent to throw another canister of fuel into the fire when there are so many divisive issues at play in the public domain?

Would it be worth it, if it divides the people more than it unites them?

Besides, why blame vernacular schools when the problem lies with national schools? That there are parents willing to send their children to Tamil schools, some no better than ramshackle rubber smokehouses, tells us something is not entirely right with national schools.

While a single school system is not expedient politically at this point, what should be pursued is the strengthening of national schools. It remains the best, if not the only, remedy.

Four things need to be done to attract more non-Malays to national schools: providing quality education,

recruiting more non-Malay teachers, offering Mandarin and Tamil as subjects, and teaching Science and Mathematics in English.

Some national schools boast long waiting lists because they are perceived as being better than the rest.

Smart schools, cluster schools and those producing multitudes of top scorers in public examinations every year are extremely popular, such that parents are known to use ingenious methods (and the addresses of their friends and relatives) to secure their children a place.

What attracts non-Malays should be cultivated in all national schools, and at the same time, there must be the political will to address what repels them.

Vernacular schools have always been part of the national education landscape, but “in those days” many parents sent their children to sekolah kebangsaan. What has changed in

just a decade or two?

For one, the “Islamisation” of national schools is more acute, and yet it is one issue the authorities have so far only skirted around, perhaps for fear of ruffling feathers.

When it has not even been directly acknowledged as a problem, how can the authorities even begin to address it?

Some say it is justifiable for national schools to have Islamic principles in their teaching and learning environment because the majority of the pupils are Muslims.

But should religion even figure in school life? The concept of national schools should be that it is the mainstream of education for children of all races.

There must also be a more concerted recruitment of non-Malay teachers. To say they are disdainful of the teaching profession cannot be true when many are in private

schools, where the benefits match effort and contribution.

Educators have long called for the establishment of a teachers commission: an independent body for teachers, not unlike the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam).

With a commission to look after its welfare, the teaching profession could be separated from the civil service and put on a different salary scheme. A memorandum to this effect was submitted to the Education Ministry in 2004, but the response was tepid.

Optimistically, Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin has promised to look into how the education system can be improved. National schools must be the new minister’s priority.

Make it easier for parents to make that momentous decision.