

EDUCATION

*Public schools bring us together*

NST 30/7/12 MS 19.

**W**HEN I was a small boy growing up in Tumpat, Kelantan, in the early 1960s, I had lots of Chinese friends. Some were also of Siamese and Indian parentage. We studied at Tumpat English School — the only primary school with English as the medium of instruction. The teachers were a mixed lot. We had Chinese, Indian and Malay teachers. Many were trained at (Malayan Teachers Training College) Kirkby. As children, we ate together at the canteen, played in the fields, roamed the padi fields and ponds looking for fighting fish and visited each other's houses during weekends. We never thought of the differences between us. Those were lazy, carefree days when parents did not interfere much.

There was also another group of Chinese boys in town. They studied in a Chinese school. They never mixed with us. They moved in their own group and played among themselves. It was the same with Malay pupils from the national primary school.

Many years later and very much older, I asked myself this question: do we really need schools that segregate us?

It would seem that, being largely populated by a single race, vernacular schools are ethnocentric and potential breeding grounds for distrust, racial ignorance and religious hatred. Differences in religion — one of the key elements in national unity — is highlighted and emphasised here, most of the times, unconsciously. Ignorance created in such circumstances can lead to fear and hatred; especially when it is exploited by extremist groups determined to undermine community harmony and foster divisions.

The same can be said of national schools. These are largely populated by Malays. The sad part is that, the early years are the golden years of children. It is during this

crucial period that their physical, mental and spiritual dimensions begin to form. Many of the beliefs, religious understanding, racial stands, tolerance and other characteristics formed during these early years are irreversible.

The question is, why should we have different types of schools when in reality we only need one — the public school? Public schools, as indicated by the name, belong to everyone. The different religions, languages, traditions and cultures of all races should be fostered here. The learning of the mother tongue, which is an important part of education, should be given ample time in these schools and taught by proficient teachers. If the need arises, school time should be extended with lunch provided.

The standards set in these schools must be of the highest level and all the children guaranteed a quality education. This cannot be done overnight, but a start has to be made. To enable this to happen, the government needs to invest heavily in public schools, select the best teachers, train them to teach and support them with extensive professional development.

As I see it, the flaw in our education system started in the early 1950s, when compromises were made to our education policy. The Barnes Report, which was passed into law as the Education Ordinance of 1952, had proposed English and Malay as the media of instruction. It was rejected by the Chinese and a compromise was made in the Razak Report of 1956. Many of these compromises, which were based on trust and goodwill, were actually racial and political in nature.

The final provisions for the establishment of English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools at the pri-

mary level in the report have catered only to the short-term needs of the races, ignoring the long-term effect of such a policy on national integration. A strong and decisive action in the interest of the nation at that time would have given us better prospects at integration, but the clamour for independence and pressure from powerful Chinese groups brought about hasty decisions. It was a form of appeasement that has always been the dilemma affecting our education system.

Today, 50 years on, it is still a political game. Many politicians are still cajoling and provoking voters along racial lines. Education has not been spared either. Every politician knows that the solution to many of our racial problems is in the education system. Education is about building a nation. It should go beyond politics. Perhaps politicians should take a look at how Finland has been able to create the most successful education system in the world because their politicians compromised and were willing to put the long-term strategic education needs of the country above their own interests.

Perhaps in Malaysia, it is time for another educational compromise between the races — this time it has to go beyond race and politics — for the sake of national unity. However, as this is a sensitive issue, a nationwide survey should first be carried out for a consensus on our education policy on integration.

As it is now, there are few real examples of racial unity in our country. We may seem integrated at population level, but internally, we are still racially divided. All the races live in their own groups. Separate schools for each community and differences in languages, social and cultural networks simply

*We may seem integrated at population level, but internally, we are still racially divided.*

push many communities to operate in their own entities. We interact briefly with the other races out of necessity in the workplace, the market, during festivals and when doing business.

To promote meaningful social interaction, our lives need to touch more often at various common points. Public schools would be one of the best options for this to happen.

Nevertheless, the government should be praised for the liberal approach to our rich and diverse cultural traditions. However, I have my doubts about the effectiveness of the occasional shows of unity during celebrations. These are superficial, skin deep, reluctant meetings of the races. Except for the leaders, many will sit in their own racial groups. These events, though enjoyable and colourful, do very little in the way of integration.

Ever notice the students in higher institutions of learning? These are the end products of our education system. Are they interacting with the other races? Except for greetings, pleasantries and occasional interaction during group discussions, sports and club activities, these students generally move in their own racial groups. Observe the situation in the lecture halls. How many of them are sitting in groups other than their own? How do we group ourselves in towns and residential areas?

In the big towns like Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Johor Baru, Seremban and Kota Baru, the delineation of the races is obvious. How can we continue to ignore these warning signs in our society and yet with equal interest accept the rhetorical assumption that there is unity in diversity?

First, our strategies on integration should be focused on our education system. Experience has shown us that integration strategies built on concentrating minorities in huge national schools or a

majority race in small or huge vernacular schools will only accentuate segregation. In such schools, friendships and lasting bonds are bound to fall within race.

What we need are common public schools where, from an early age, the races mix freely and spontaneously in classrooms, canteens, during projects, field trips, extracurricular activities and sports.

As these schools can control and organise the mixing patterns of teachers and students through the various activities, segregation would be less pronounced.

Of course, our education system should not be blamed for all the social evils, but having three different races taught by teachers of their own race in three different languages does not help either.

Education should not exist in isolation from society: it should be an integral part of it, and both reflect and shape its values. In fact, no school should be allowed to service a single race.

A look at the various successful education systems in America and Europe will show that the presence of different types of schools for the different races is peculiar only to Malaysia.

Even in many Asian countries like Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, India and China, integration of races is done through public schools, with either the national language or English as the medium of instruction.

In the Netherlands and Finland for example, there are hardly any private primary schools, which means that children from different backgrounds go to the same public school.

If national integration is one of the main aims of the Malaysian Education Policy, perhaps the Education Ministry, in the midst of reviewing the National Education Policy, should take a hard look at our education policy.

**Alkut**, Kota Baru, Kelantan