

Charting the way forward in education



There has been much talk about English-medium schools in recent days. The end of English-medium schools came abruptly with little or no discussion during troubling times. Now may well be the time for discourse on such schools.

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Over the past few weeks, many articles and letters have been published on the desirability of reintroducing English-medium schools in Malaysia. Those among us who were schooled in the 50s and 60s often reminisce with fondness and nostalgia about the good times we shared with friends of all races.

We also recall the many devoted teachers who "terrified" us but yet earned our highest respect, so well portrayed by Lat in his cartoons in the characters of Mr Singh, Tuan Syed and Mrs Hew.

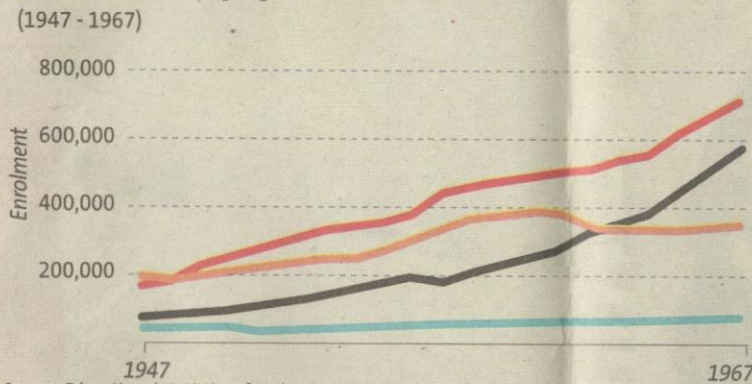
Students then identified strongly with their schools and healthy inter-school rivalry contributed to raising not just academic standards but the standard of sports and other extra-curricular activities, including inter-school debates.

Looking back, it is easy to see why so many of us recall our schooling days with such fond memories and wish to revisit those days of old.

In looking back, it is important to get a sense of how multiracial schools were then and the significant role played by English-medium schools in bringing us together as Malaysians before such schools were phased out from 1970.

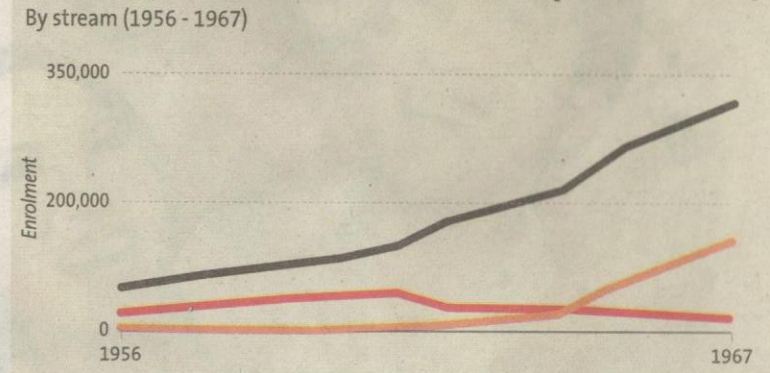
Statistics are difficult to come by but there is a gem of a publication entitled *Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1938 to 1967* published by

Enrolment of pupils in assisted schools (1947 - 1967)

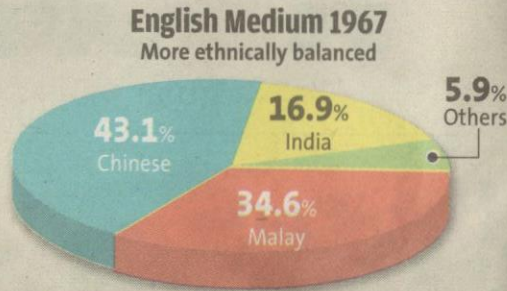


Source: Educational statistics of Malaysia 1938 to 1967

Secondary school enrolment (assisted & private schools) By stream (1956 - 1967)

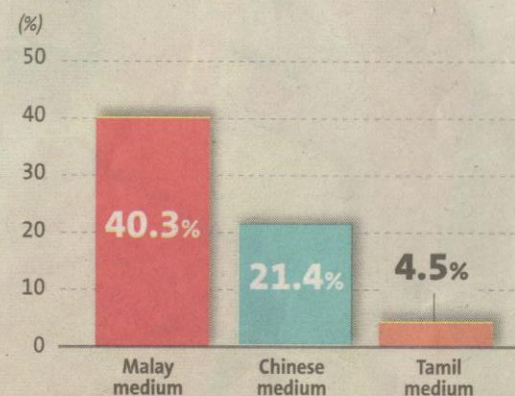


By 1967 English Medium schools accounted for 33.8% of all students in the country with a healthy multiracial mix



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Schools (%)



that education has in the heart of every parent and central to the competitiveness of a nation.

Contrast this consultation with the overnight decision then to abandon English as the medium of instruction – a decision taken whilst the country was caught in the immediate aftermath of the May 13 riots where many people were killed and cars and shophouses were burnt and the priority then was security and bringing back life to normalcy.

We will leave it to researchers and insiders at the ministry at that time to reveal the reasons for this sudden promulgation of a policy that had such a long term negative impact on our competitiveness.

Malaysia 1938 to 1967 published by the Educational Planning and Research Division of the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 1967 which is available online at <http://www.fmm.org.my/upload/Educational%20Statistics%20of%20Malaysia%201938-1967.pdf>.

Also included was an important graph charting the enrolment of students in assisted schools between 1947 and 1967 (see chart).

It is clear from the chart that enrolment in the English-medium schools enjoyed the highest rate of growth among the language streams and would have become the largest group of schools in the country if the policy had not been abruptly changed in 1970.

Suffice to say that by 1967, English-medium schools accounted for 33.8% of all students in the country, Malay-medium schools 40.3%, Chinese-medium schools 21.4% and Tamil-medium schools 4.5%.

It is also useful to recall that parents were allowed, then, to choose the language stream of the schools they enrolled their children in.

As no statistics were available on the racial breakdown of students in the English-medium schools, a close approximation was made by dividing the total population of students in 1967 according to the racial composition of each group in that year and subtracting the number of students already enrolled in their respective language medium schools.

The balance is a realistic approximation of students enrolled in the English-medium schools. Using this method of approximation, the English-medium schools had attracted a healthy racial mix of approximately 34.6% Malay, Chinese 43.1%, 16.4% Indian and 5.9% "other" students. (see chart 2)



Good times: It is still not too late to revisit the issue of English-medium schools and reintroduce them.

At the secondary school level, English-medium schools, administered by both the government as well as mission schools were by far, the most popular type of schools, attracting more students than any of the other language streams, a choice made by the majority of parents throughout the country.

Students followed a curriculum used worldwide and textbooks in English that were carefully selected and graded in complexity through years of use and fine-tuning.

Students then sat for examinations that were internationally graded and recognised as the "O" Levels of the Cambridge Examination Board. Such students later went on to assume important positions in all sectors of the economy – the government, bureaucracy, academia and the private sector.

The landscape, however, changed

radically after the May 10, 1969 general election and the riots of May 13. Amid the uncertainty and following the trauma of the events, the then newly appointed Education Minister, Datuk Abdul Rahman Yaacob, only two months into the job, and with little if any consultation, announced a new policy.

The policy was that from 1970, English-medium schools would cease to exist and remaining students in English language-medium schools would be phased out over the next 11 years until they completed Form Five in 1982.

This radical decision saw the beginning of the gradual erosion of the strong English language foundation, a competitive edge that Malaysia had enjoyed over its neighbouring countries for decades.

Along with the removal of English-medium schools, a number of seri-

ous problems emerged in the education system, including low achievement rates in science, mathematics and reasoning as evidenced in Malaysia's low PISA and TIMSS scores, the employability of graduates and their relative competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world.

It is no mere coincidence that the top 10 scorers are from the OECD countries and Asian tigers, and if we are to achieve sustainable high income status in the future, our scores in these benchmarks have to be improved.

We are heartened by the current national dialogue taking place over the drafting and finalisation of the National Education Blueprint. Various interest groups and stakeholders have been consulted, including right up to the Council of Rulers, and rightly so given the special place

We only know, for example, that veteran politician Dr Goh Cheng Teik wrote in December 1970 in his book *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* that the radical educational policy change in 1969 was made without the knowledge or authorisation of then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Referring to the same issue, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his book *Doctor in the House* wrote, "Out of the blue, Tun Rahman Yaacob announced that all government secondary schools and government-aided schools would become National Secondary Schools where the teaching would be in Malay. Schools in Sarawak and Sabah, however would be exempted. His decision made Tun Rahman very popular with the Malays, particularly Malay university students, but the move had a political rather than an academic agenda."

It is not too late in the day to revisit the issue of English-medium schools – this time not under the shadow of the events that occurred in May and June 1969, but in the light and with the benefit of the knowledge and experience that we have accumulated over the past 44 years.

We owe it to ourselves to have this serious conversation on the way forward for education, the bedrock for maximising the potential of all citizens and enhancing the competitiveness of our nation in these globally challenging times, especially with the advent of this Internet age.

> *Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon is managing director of Royal Selangor and President of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers. He also serves on the boards of EPF, MIDA and Matrade. Part Two of his article will appear in Sunday Star tomorrow.*