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Single stream schools for promoting integration have commonsensical logic to them. They were officially proposed by the British colonial Barnes Committee in 1951 although they were then intended to be single-stream English schools. Ever since the Razak Report of 1956, it has been

“the ultimate objective” of UMNO policy to have only single stream schools.

At Independence and even at the time of the Education Act of 1961, “single stream” in fact meant English stream. Since the seventies, single stream has come to mean education in Bahasa Malaysia. But by a twist of irony created by flip flopping politicians, we may be moving back to a single stream in the English language!

The racial politics throughout post-Independent Malaysia has revolved around this intractable problem. Recently, Professor Khoo Khay Kim and former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir have once again called for single stream schools in order to integrate Malaysians. Single stream of course means the abolition of Chinese and Tamil schools.

Prof. Khoo’s line of thinking is understandable for a Malaysian who did not undergo mother

tongue education but that is his problem. Dr Mahathir's attitude toward the Chinese-language schools is well-known – throughout his 22-year reign as prime minister he did not entertain a single cordial dialogue with the Chinese educationists. In 1975, when he was Education Minister, he threatened the leaders of Dong Jiao Zong with dire consequences if they went ahead with the Unified Examination Certificate of the Independent Chinese secondary schools.

Dr Mahathir further provoked the 1987 crisis by sending non-Mandarin qualified teachers to the Chinese schools which then allowed him to unleash Operation Lalang and the subsequent assault on the judiciary. The Chairmen of Dong Zong and Jiao Zong, in their sixties and seventies respectively in 1987, were detained under the Internal Security Act together with me.

During the interminable interrogation sessions while under solitary confinement in 1987, the Special Branch operatives kept badgering me about why I couldn't be more like Prof. Khoo Khay Kim in my thinking. My deadpan response was: "You already have one Khoo Khay Kim...Why do you need another one?" (See Kua Kia Soong, "445 Days Behind The Wire", 1989: 42)

A 200-Year Heritage to be Proud Of!

Chinese schools of Malaysia represent a community-based heritage that goes back nearly two hundred years. They have helped to nurture Malaysian talents and subsidized the national education budget many times over. The pen drive you use has been invented by a graduate of the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools. These are achievements all Malaysians can be proud of.

The “Fifth Happiness School” in Penang was founded in 1819. Chinese and Tamil schools thrived largely on self-help during colonial times:

“British colonial administrators were so impressed by the high level of organization among the Malayan Chinese that they left them virtually alone to manage their own affairs.” (Kua Kia Soong, “The Chinese Schools of Malaysia: A Protean Saga”, 2008: 16)

Not many people realize that at Independence, there were more Chinese and Tamil schools than there are today! Yes, in 1957 we had 1,342 Chinese primary schools and 86 Chinese-stream secondary schools for an ethnic Chinese population of 2.3 million in the peninsula alone. Today, we only have 1,280+ Chinese primary schools and 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools for an ethnic Chinese population of more than six million throughout Malaysia. The statistics for Tamil schools show the same decline from more than 700 in 1957 to just more than 500 today. That's how far we have regressed!

Far from being segregationist, Chinese schools of Malaysia have been steadily attracting non-Chinese pupils even as the Government has restricted any further increase in the number of these SRJK schools. There are now more than 60,000 non-Chinese pupils studying in Chinese schools, adding to the critical shortage of space in these schools.

Grossly Overcrowded Schools

The overcrowded conditions in many of these SRJK schools have been created by a vindictive government policy that will not allow any further increase in the number of these schools. My children went to our local Chinese New Village primary school that enrolls more than 2000 pupils in one acre piece of land! Fifty pupils in one class are not abnormal in the Chinese schools. Is this the enlightened education policy the BN government talks about? It is a marvel that such schools still manage to produce professionals for the country but for sure there are even more sacrificial lambs that end up at the bottom of the heap.

There is no racial discrimination against any ethnic community even though the competition for places in Chinese schools is keen because of the desperate shortage of Chinese schools especially in the urban areas. The Chinese school at Frasers Hill is almost wholly filled by ethnic Indians while the Chinese school at Hulu Langat provides assistance to the Orang Asli children!

In contrast, we have national institutions such as MARA science schools and UiTM supported totally by public funds which discriminate against Non-bumiputras. Are these not single stream institutions and do they promote integration? Somehow, we do not hear the strident condemnation of such blatant racially discrimination and segregationist policies by Prof Khoo or Dr Mahathir!

A Sensible Solution to Integrate Our Schools

The right to mother tongue education is an internationally recognized human right. The UN even recognizes “International Mother Language Day” on February 21st. Knowing the protean saga these Chinese schools of Malaysia have been through and having been part of this movement for nearly thirty years, I dare say UMNO would be dicing with political suicide if they persist in their quixotic “ultimate objective”. If UMNO’s “ultimate objective” to have only a single stream in the education system of Malaysia ever comes about, MCA and Gerakan would be totally irrelevant, if they are not already!

So why don’t we put our energies into more sensible solutions rather than destroying another Malaysian heritage that has served the nation well and creating another crisis such as we saw in 1987 and at other junctures in our history?

The efforts to promote integration among the peoples of Malaysia must never cease. During the Eighties, the Chinese educationists agreed to an “Integrated Activities” programme among the different streams but then the Mahathir administration conveniently ignored the initiative after it had been agreed upon.

The Chinese educationists opposed Mahathir's "Vision Schools" mainly because these put the three language streams under the hegemony of the Malay-language school. The Chinese and Tamil schools in these "Vision Schools" were strictly relocated schools and were by no means new schools.

Let Local Education Authorities Decide

A sensible solution would be to build more new schools for all streams. At Independence, we had elected local government which solved educational needs at the local level through "local education authorities". That way, we can take politics, especially racial politics out of education policy. The local education authority surveys and assesses the objective needs of the community and allocates appropriate funding for the various school streams through the local government budget.

Integrated School Complex

In order to promote integration and to make the most of scarce resources, the different streams could be built close to each other so that they can share scarce quality resources and facilities such as library, playing field, park,

sports complex, stadium, computer labs, etc. The annual sports day and other competitions could be jointly organized. The same can be done for artistic and cultural events. This will not only promote integration but will surely improve the quality of our athletes and performing artistes.

This concept is very different from Dr Mahathir's "Vision Schools". Each stream in the "Integrated School Complex" maintains its autonomy, with its own administration and each school in this complex is a new school, not a relocated school.

It is time that the Government starts treating the Chinese and Tamil schools as part of the national education system and not their fabled step children. We have wasted years of neglect of these schools mainly because of the currency of the now discredited "Melting Pot" thesis practiced in the United States in the past.

UMNO has to come round to the fact that the Chinese and Tamil communities will not be duped by slogans such as "1Malaysia" so long as they see continual unfair allocation for Chinese and Tamil schools by the Government. Nor are they amused by yesterday's men throwing up old red herrings about Chinese and Tamil schools being segregationist.

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