

LEARNING CURVE

WHEN it comes to whether vernacular schools are stumbling blocks to national unity, the knee-jerk response from the authorities is that a certain percentage of the pupils are from the other ethnic groups. This is considered as proof that there is so-called "national unity".

This justification lacks depth in the understanding of "national unity". Worse still, it is rather superficial in the context of education.

It has been well-established that even when all the pupils are from the same ethnic group, there is no assurance of national unity which goes beyond ethnicity and religious beliefs. Quite frequently, people of the same ethnic and religious groups are also reportedly at each other's throats the world over.

Simply put, national unity is not about numbers or percentages such as Key Performance Indicators. Otherwise, our universities will not face any issue of ethnic/religious polarisation since virtually all of them (except a few) have mixed ethnic groups in their enrolment. Sad to say, this is not the situation today.

The fact that "national unity" is one of five system aspirations in the Education Blueprints for schools and universities is evidence of the situation. Linked to this is "national identity" as one of the six student aspirations, indicating that we need a more thoughtful response grounded on education. If not, we will continue to pull wool over our own eyes,

National unity through education

as the situation continues to worsen.

"National unity" is an attitude that shapes behaviour based on cultural competency leading to a cohesive sense of belonging towards higher national values. We have experienced this several times when the country experienced a disaster, was "challenged" — be it related to sports or in terms of security — and when we rejoiced national achievements and celebrated high points in its history. In almost all such incidences, Malaysians spontaneously put their differences aside and became "one", offering solutions to better the situation at hand. We bonded with each other for the love of the country as the priority.

It becomes a natural way to remain unified by common national aspiration to live together regardless of differences and divides. In this regard, it is interesting to note how one of UNESCO's four pillars of learning, namely "learning to live together", has been interpreted to

include participating in and cooperating with other people in all human activities; and developing an in-depth understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values. This, in turn, requires the nurturing of a high quality relationship at all levels that could lead to inner peace. No figures and percentages can adequately capture all these as an indicator of "national unity". It is about behavioural change built on the internalisation of higher values.

More so, if we consider yet another pillar of learning that must be accomplished at the same time — "learning to be" which is closely related to "learning to live together".

It embraces the ability to better one's personality and to act with greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility. It implies the development of all the dimensions of the complete individual and the belief in a holistic and integrated approach to educating the human person, not simply human capital. Succinctly it instills confidence in contributing to the total development of the whole being, making learning to live together more meaningful and lasting. "Learning to be" therefore approximates closely to the attainment of "national

identity" and strongly supports "national identity".

Based on this, the knee-jerk reaction is unsatisfactory. It may be politically "sound" but not so education-wise. Partisan politics can only make the situation worse over time. The reality is that the current delivery framework — be it schools or institutions of higher learning — is defective in rooting the two pillars of learning in advocating "national unity". As a result "national unity" remains external and detached — therefore the overemphasis on flying the Jalur Gemilang, singing the national anthem and idolising leaders. Nothing much is being internalised as part of learning, regardless of the mixed population. The irony is that these two pillars are well-embedded within Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan (National Philosophy of Education) but have been overshadowed by the emphasis to produce "human capital" instead of the nurturing of a balanced and holistic "human being". The time has come to get the latter right.

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