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One subject alone will not build nation



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FOCUS: Citizenship education, not history, as foundation for national unity

AS Malaysian society faces recurring and emerging problems, the circle of advisers to the government and other elite advocate various solutions to the problems.

Always, education would be the sector where advocates suggest changes must be made. Always, it is about introducing new subjects or revising the contents of existing subjects. Always it is about prescribed contents, and prescribed pedagogies and prescribed assessments and regulations.

The art of muddling through and tinkering with the syllabuses or curriculum does not seem to solve the recurring problems of social and racial distance and religious intolerance. There is the gap between the problems identified and the solutions offered and administered, because of a lack of understanding of root causes of problems.

One problem in education and society is that History as a subject is seen as the panacea for the problems of national unity. When minds are locked on the paradigm that history is about citizenship, such minds are not aware of, or neglect, equally or even more important subjects for nation-building, like civics and citizenship education.

Advocates for the introduction of piecemeal educational reforms see reforms in terms of subjects. However, curriculum development is not just in terms of subjects but also in terms of topics, themes, concepts and social laws. There are also the close relationships between and among school subjects. There is the need to dispel the myth that one subject

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alone, like Religious Study, can build good character. Or that History will foster national unity.

There are some intellectual fault lines in the reasoning of thought leaders who assume that individual subjects change the universes of people. Really, what transform the universes of people and nations are the cumulation of subjects, and the encyclopedia of facts and concepts which allow learners to construct their gestalt in making sense of themselves, others and their environments.

History is not just Malaysian History. There is World History, Islamic History, Southeast Asian History, Japanese History and so on. So, to see History as the solution to the problems of national unity or loyalty is really to focus only on Malaysian history. History is not literature and literature is not history. Literature is close to music and theatre and poetry. History is closer to political sciences, sociology, anthropology and economics.

History can be regarded to be in the domain of humanities or the social sciences. When seen as social science, History distinguishes fact from opinion, objectivity from subjectivity, interpretation from fictionalisation. When history is seen as in the humanities, there is the licence to work on revisionist history of race, nationhood, religion, ideas and civilisations. History then is seen as citizenship education. Actually, a large portion of the curriculum of citizenship education can deal with history but citizenship education is not history.

Aspects of history which are to be revisionist national history can be in the citizenship education curriculum. When history is used as propaganda or indoctrination then, students-learners will be cynical about history, not when they are just learning but beyond the school years. Beyond the school years when students are free and obtain other facts and interpretations, cynicism will reign within the nation.

The historical mind is not just about local history but about the universal and civilisational mind. Citizenship education focuses more on the present uniqueness of a country and on some universal ideas.

History focuses more on the relationship of the past and present. Both subjects are also about historical literacy, political literacy and social literacy. Social media is now addressing (as yet not fully understood) realities across civics, citizenship education, History, the Social Sciences and other subjects.

The work of nation-building is work in progress. The steadfast efforts by those committed to stability and unity are really challenging, because for every few steps forward of progress made, there are several steps backwards and regress. For every inspirational message of nation-building and unity, for every image of children from different races and religions smiling and playing together, there are contrary images of discord. Positive images of unity and acceptance are overturned by negative images of rejection, marginalisation and alienation of the others who are not like us.

As there are community and nation builders, there are those who uphold contrary beliefs regarding the nature of state, communities, the futures and destiny. Nation-building is the intellectual struggle between constructive and destructive forces, reconciliation and supremacist agenda. In this struggle, common sense, and the dream of a peaceful and united world must prevail over the messages of doomsayers.

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