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Better facilities in SJKC reason for higher non-Chinese enrolments - Experts

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There has been a sharp increase in the number of non-Chinese students attending Chinese primary schools over the past few decades. — NSTP FILE PIC

KUALA LUMPUR: Recognising the increasing importance of mastering a third language, especially in the workforce, Amira Firzanah Ahmad Zamri took a different approach by enrolling her youngest child in a Chinese national-type primary school (SJKC) in Gombak, Selangor, near her house.

The accountant at a private company believes that mastering Mandarin, in addition to Bahasa Melayu and English, will provide an advantage for her son in the future.

"This is also my way of encouraging him to broaden his social interactions with other ethnic groups. I too have the opportunity to get to know and share my views with Chinese parents through the school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)," Amira Firzanah, 39, told Bernama.

However, she acknowledged that the facilities available at the SJKC, such as air-conditioned classrooms and uncrowded classes and the school's proximity to her home, also contributed to her decision to enrol her son in the vernacular school four years ago.

"He is the only one (in my family) studying at the SJKC… my two older children are attending national schools," she said, adding her friends' opinions also influenced her decision to send her youngest child to the Chinese-medium school.

A WORRYING TREND?

Amira Firzanah's decision to send her son to an SJKC is not exactly unusual as there has been a sharp increase in the number of non-Chinese students attending Chinese primary schools over the past few decades.

According to data from the United Chinese School Teachers' Association and United Chinese School Committees' Association (collectively known as Dong Jiao Zong), non-Chinese student enrolments in the various SJKC rose from 7,309 in 1989 to 52,043 in 1998, and 72,443 in 2010.

By 2020, the number reportedly shot up to 101,011 or 19.75 percent of the student population of nearly 1,300 Chinese primary schools nationwide, with the non-Chinese students comprising Malays, Indians, Orang Asli and foreigners.

It was reported recently that non-Chinese students now represent 20 percent of their total student population, sparking various reactions among the public, with some people expressing concern about the future of national schools (sekolah kebangsaan or SK) and the status of the national language, considering that these vernacular schools use Mandarin as the medium of instruction.

Disagreeing with this viewpoint, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Faculty of Education lecturer Dr Anuar Ahmad said the situation, in fact, has the potential to strengthen Malaysia's identity as a nation with a plural society.

He even felt it is not impossible for non-Chinese students to make up 50 percent of the total SJKC student population if the trend continues in the coming years.

"After independence, Chinese and Tamil primary schools have been using the national curriculum and assessment system. The teachers are also from various ethnic groups and have undergone training in national teacher training institutes," he said, adding many Chinese primary schools also provide facilities that are friendly to Muslims.

He also believed the SJKC PTAs are a good avenue to foster racial unity through the interactions of parents from various ethnic backgrounds, in addition to the students themselves who come from diverse ethnicities.

But he agreed that efforts to shape a Malaysian identity should be carried out in Chinese primary schools, adding even though it may take a longer time to be realised, "it is not something impossible".

STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SCHOOLS

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was reported as saying at a function in Pasir Mas, Kelantan, earlier this month that unity can only be achieved through the national education system which, he said, should be the foundation in all schools, regardless of whether they are national, vernacular or Islamic schools.

Congress of Unions of Teachers in the Malaysian Education Service secretary-general Mohd Azizee Hasan, meanwhile, acknowledged the many advantages of studying in an SJKC, including the availability of better facilities and the opportunity to master Mandarin, and added that national schools need to be strengthened.

"Among the weaknesses of SK that often become a topic of debate are (their students') proficiency levels in mathematics, science and English, with the perception that SJKC teachers are more skilled in teaching these subjects," he said.

Not refuting this notion, he said the shortage of teachers in national schools has led to a situation where teachers are assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise.

"The national schools located in urban areas are not the same as those in rural areas. Factors such as the number of students, their parents' socioeconomic status, school facilities, management and quality of the teachers also contribute to academic achievement.

"The situation should be improved by ensuring SK teachers are skilled in teaching these subjects (maths, science and English)," he said, adding most SJKC teachers are competent in teaching the subjects assigned to them.

Mohd Azizee also agreed Chinese primary schools have better facilities, such as computer labs, science labs and smart TVs, compared to national schools, adding if the latter's facilities are improved, they will be able to attract the attention of parents from different racial backgrounds.

He also suggested that the Education Ministry intensify efforts to promote Mandarin as a subject in national schools, adding he believed Chinese primary schools will not be able to shape a Malaysian identity, given that these schools are still dominated by the Chinese, with the participation of Indians and other ethnic groups being very low.

ENHANCE ROLE OF PTA

National Parent-Teacher Association Consultative Council president Associate Prof Datuk Dr Mohamad Ali Hassan, meanwhile, sees the strong support of the PTAs as one of the factors contributing to academic excellence in Chinese primary schools.

"Their PTAs rarely oppose any effort by the schools to empower students and provide their full support including in terms of donating materials, funds and others," he said, adding this has allowed the schools concerned to provide their students with excellent infrastructure despite being government-aided schools.

"When compared to national schools in urban areas, the SJKC's infrastructure such as computer labs and science labs appear better equipped.

"Furthermore, the discipline is also good. We don't see many reports of misconduct among students and teachers (of Chinese schools) in the mass media," he added. — BERNAMA