NEW STRAITS TIMES

With enough imagination, schools can be unifying force

By Hanson Chong - February 16, 2024 @ 3:09pm



IN a diverse society like Malaysia, national schools play a crucial role in bringing together pupils from various backgrounds to foster national unity.- NSTP/FAIZ ANUAR

IN a diverse society like Malaysia, national schools play a crucial role in bringing together pupils from various backgrounds to foster national unity.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 acknowledges the importance of education in nation-building and unity, recognising that schools should create a shared learning experience for pupils of different social, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds.

While public schools are supposed to be contributors to the development of a common national identity, critics argue that the existence of vernacular schools contribute to ethnic divide.

These schools are often relatively ethnically homogeneous. The Education Ministry reports that in 2011, the Chinese made up 88 per cent of the pupil population in Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJKC), while Indians made up 100 per cent of enrolment in Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT).

The same is true for Maktab Rendah Sains Mara (MRSM) and Sekolah Berasrama Penuh (SBP), where most of the pupil population are Bumiputera.

But do ethnically homogenous schools lead to greater ethnic divisions?

In 2023, I conducted a survey on the friendships of university students, including those from public and private universities.

The goal was to explore the links between students' schooling background and the ethnic diversity of their current friendship networks.

This research helps us understand whether the school type someone attended earlier in life affected their friendship formation later.

Looking at friendships allows us to answer the question of whether attending certain schools leads to greater or lesser ethnic divide, with potential implications on how to design our education system to promote national unity.

Two key findings emerged.

First, students tended to have friends of the same ethnicity regardless of their schooling background. This is the effect of ethnic homophily or the tendency for individuals to associate with those from the same ethnic group.

Second, while ethnic homophily is the driving force behind friendship formation for Malaysians of all ethnicities, the school type an individual attended earlier in life could make this tendency stronger or weaker.

Indeed, the data shows that ethnic homophily is weaker among students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK), indicating that attending these schools promote more diverse friendships.

On the other hand, attending ethnically homogeneous schools — vernacular schools, MRSM, SBP or Chinese independent schools — neither strengthens nor weakens ethnic homophily.

This means that a person from an ethnically homogeneous school is no more likely to have friends of the same ethnicity than baseline expectations.

Why is SMK effective in promoting diverse friendships, while other schools seem to "fail"? The answer most likely lies in the ethnic diversity in SMK.

SMK is a common choice for pupils from all ethnicities because of its affordability and accessibility.

This is the role of national schools in plural societies — serving as a key point of convergence in the lives of pupils. Interaction between pupils of different backgrounds in national schools could reduce prejudice and increase acceptance towards people of different ethnic backgrounds.

But attending an ethnically homogenous school does not mean that your later friendships will be homogenous.

This implies that the way to foster greater national unity is to create more opportunities for meaningful inter-ethnic contact between pupils in different schools rather than disbanding ethnically exclusive institutions.

One way to do this is through initiatives like the Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan (RIMUP). The programme allows pupils from different school types to interact through a range of activities, including extracurricular classes, motivational camps and sporting events.

Still, more needs to be done, including ensuring that programmes like RIMUP facilitate meaningful "natural", not forced, interactions between pupils. To this end, such programmes could be more pupil-driven, focusing on activities they enjoy.

Likewise, to increase participation, there is a need to increase public awareness of the programme and to communicate its value as a key initiative to foster stronger sense of unity and cohesion within society.

As Malaysia prepares for the next education blueprint, policymakers can explore innovative approaches to enhance inter-ethnic contact, with the goal of promoting greater unity and understanding among all Malaysians.

*** The writer is researcher at the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia**