

Transforming national schools

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LOOK TO THE FINNS: Teaching in the national language can top global rankings.

THE lifting of the quota for Malaysians to enrol in international schools has brought much rejoicing to some quarters, especially those who want English as the medium of instruction. It is clear that those who can afford an international school education will benefit most from the latest move, despite the high cost incurred to enrol in such schools.

The question now is, can a national school be international, in the sense that it is internationally recognised and of international reputation?

A friend, who is a Finnish national and works as an analyst at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Directorate of Education in Paris, seems to agree that this is possible.

In Finland, the schools are consistently ranked the highest in the world in performance, and the quality is uniform throughout the country. Interestingly, they are "national schools" and the medium of instruction is in the local language, although English is taught as a subject!

In fact, parents have no qualms sending their children to the nearest school and not having to travel far to find quality education for the children.

Such is the case for other Nordic countries whose populations are much smaller than in the Malay-speaking world.

The Nordic countries believe in making quality education accessible to all citizens, be they rich or poor, while disparity and multiple tracks in education is not the norm.

To top it all, Finnish students reportedly have among the shortest class hours in the world, receive very little homework, and tend to spend more time on art and music than students anywhere else in the world. The world of tuition and extra classes is not the practice.

Given that the Nordic countries have a combined population of about 25 million, and the ratio of teachers to students is about that of Malaysia's, could the Finnish system be our model in reforming the education system?

Last week, I was privileged to be among a group visiting two rural schools near Kuching which were under the Trust School Project. Both were in "bad shape" about a year ago before joining the project.

Now the class ambience is cheerful, decorated with works done by the students with innovative ideas, underscoring that a different kind of teaching and learning is taking place here.

The students are encouraged to do group work, and even find out and correct their own mistakes as part of the learning process, so that making mistakes is not a taboo any more. What is most promising is that all these are culminating in a transformation of sorts, with the results meticulously tracked, when the project comes to a halt in about three years' time.

It goes without saying that the journey has been an arduous one. After all, it is about mindset change, and there is still more convincing to be done to move people out of their comfort zone.

There are still bureaucratic processes that need to be dismantled to allow for more expeditious implementation. And no doubt there is more training that must be undertaken and fine-tuned before the "old system" is totally replaced by a new one.

Most convincing are the attitudinal changes shown by the heads of the schools and the teachers who are implementing the change with guidance from experienced trainers.

As the staff of the schools explained their tasks in the transformation process, one can easily detect a sense of renewed pride of what they can do if only the right approach is systematically adopted and with the right team of dedicated staff and professionals working hand in hand.

On top of this, parents and parent-teacher associations are giving help to make sure that the learning environment in the classrooms remains conducive.

In other words, Malaysia can do the right thing to ensure that the transformation is driven in the right direction by ensuring equity and access to as many students as possible and uniting the fragmented existing systems.

Perhaps in the not too distant future, we, too, can send our children to the nearest available school without having to worry about quality. This must be the ultimate aim in transforming the education system.