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THE ELITE, EXAM-ORIENTED EDUCATION - A
SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL SYSTEM

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The paper chase definitely a preoccupation of many Malaysians. Evidences of such a preoccupation are plentiful. Giving tutorials and writing revision exercises and examination aids are ludicrous business. One has only to step into a bookshop to realize the extent of the examination aids market. Even newspapers partake in this ludicrous market. Annually, journalists give examination tips at the approach of the national examinations. When the results of the national examinations are released top scoring students get star billing in the newspapers and schools are judged by the number of top students they produce and the percentage of passes.

Parents who can afford to have their children educated abroad have no hesitation surrendering the nurturance of their young offspring to some other agencies. At the other end of the scale, parents who have difficulties in making both ends meet are prepared to make many personal sacrifices to provide their offsprings with a university education. Advertisements also capitalize on the paper chase by advising parents to invest with them to ensure a good education for their children. One of the banks even advertises that "more education never hurts".

Malaysia is moving towards an elitish society. The clamour for university education has not abated. If anything else it has intensified. A sixth university is already on the drawing board. At this moment the student population in the existing universities exceeds 50,000 while the student population in the polytechnic is only 3,600. This means that for every one polytechnic graduate, we produce 14 universities graduates. In computing this ratio, we have not taken into account those who are overseas; the majority of them are seeking university education rather than technical education. We have a top-heavy echelon of professionals and aspiring-to-be executives and a much smaller echelon of skilled and semi-skilled workers.

The disparity in pay and social standing between these two echelons is so wide that everyone aspires to be in the professional executive stratum. Since the entry requirement for most executive posts is a university degree it is not unexpected that the demand for university education greatly exceeds the availability of places in the university. Furthermore, many parents see the degree as the vehicle for social mobility.

It is not uncommon for 'children's achievement' to be the topic of discussion in social gathering. Parents are not bashful to tell their friends and acquaintances of the number of A's their children get in their examinations, their swimming achievement, their abilities on the tennis court or their grades in music. Besides having to compete in the classroom, children from middle class families have also to do well in recreational activities. Swimming, tennis, karate and music are no longer regarded as activities to be enjoyed but as a means of gathering more trophies for parents.

How many parents or adults stand back for a moment to take stock of what they are doing. Are they really doing all these for their children's sakes and not for their own self-esteem? Are parents trying to overcompensate for what they had missed in their childhood and adolescence? In pushing for academic excellence, are parents denying their children the opportunities to develop their own areas of potentialities or brilliance, potentialities which make them 'stars' instead of 'mediocres' or 'failures' in fields chosen by their parents? Does the society care enough for the mental development and mental health of children? This paper will try to examine some of these issues not in an attempt to criticize parents, teachers and the system but rather in the spirit that as concerning adults we need to understand children, adolescents and ourselves better so that we can help children to attain, what Maslow terms it, self-actualization which, I hope, augurs for a more healthy society.

It cannot be denied that the education system in Malaysia is examination and elite oriented. Dr. Leong Yin Ching's study (1982) showed that students, teachers and parents perceive 'to do as well as possible in national examination' to be the most important objective of our school system while 'to ensure awareness of subjects not required to be known for examination' is at the bottom of the list in order of importance. Not only is our educational system examination-oriented but it also stresses on academic excellence so that subjects such as art and craft, home economics, technical drawing and agriculture are for the less able students. The survey conducted by Dr. Leong also shows that developing character was ranked second in importance by 86.7% of parents and 88.37% of teachers. Is this objective attained in our educational system? Parents and teachers differed in their perceptions. Although 68.3% of parents felt that this objectives was attained in school only 18.3% of the teachers indicated the attainment of this objective in school. Personally, I tend to agree with the teachers if 'character' is taken to mean more than the ability to apply oneself industriously to one's study in order to get good grades for the examinations.

Studies of adolescents' problems carried out in 1976-1983 indicate that our adolescents have lots of personal-psychological problems (Chiam, 1978; Chiam & Ng, 1978; Chiam, 1979; Chiam & Nik Azis, 1982; Chiam, 1982; Chiam, 1983a; and Chiam, 1983b). In fact, out of the eleven categories of adolescent problems the highest percentages of responses is in the personal-psychological category. Our adolescents tend to worry, feel inferior, lack self-confidence, be troubled by feelings of having failed in so many things which they have attempted to do, cannot forget mistakes which they have made, have trouble in making up their minds, be afraid to make mistakes. They also feel that they have too many personal problems. The image of a typical adolescent in Malaysia as reflected by the research findings, is a very insecure individual with little confidence in his/her abilities.

It will not be inaccurate to conclude that the examination-oriented educational system, parental pressure and the elitist society have lowered the adolescent's self-image or self-concept. Research findings (Coopersmith, 1967; Combs & Snygg, 1959; Chiam, 1976; and Burns, 1979) show that self-concept is the directing force of human behaviour; a person who has confidence in his ability will behave in a manner different from one who has a low estimation of his ability. Academic achievement, an aspect of manifested human behaviour, is related to self-concept (Le Benne & Green., 1969; Prenkey, 1970; and Chiam, 1976). This implies that many adolescents would have achieved better results if only they had greater confidence in their abilities. Our educational system with its emphasis on examinations generate feelings of competitiveness instead of cooperation. The less able boys and girls who are unable to win the academic excellence race acquire feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. These feelings of worthlessness, unfortunately, pervade the other areas of their behaviour. Consequently these individuals will also perform below par, even in areas which they are gifted. These feelings of worthlessness, in many cases, are reinforced at home as parents tend to reward those children who academically are more able. Even the more able may not be performing at their optimum. The tension and anxiety created by the competition in class and the pressure to do well in the examination may reduce the child's concentration, perception and creative ability.

Our research findings show that adolescents are very concerned about their school work. Worrying about examinations, worrying about marks, not spending enough time in their studies, being afraid of failing in school, getting low grades, being not smart enough, not getting studies completed on time, being unable to keep their minds on their studies, not knowing how to study effectively, and being behind others in school are the problems which troubled them greatly (Chiam, 1983a). A closer look at these problems reveals that they are all, directly or indirectly, related to examination. Contrary to popular belief, indisciplined and low ability students are also found to be troubled by these problems (Chiam, 1983b). In fact, there are more responses to these problems in this category than those in the achieving category (Chiam, unpublished data).

About 78.8% of the Form IV male students indicated 'not spending enough time in their studies while 85.3% of the Form II female students checked this as their problems. With the exception of Form IV male students (48.8%), the majority of the secondary school students (Forms II to VI) indicated this as their problems. However, research investigating the after-school activities of adolescents found the majority of them engaging in activities related to their studies (Hui & Ling, 1982). This feeling of not spending time in their studies could be generated by several sources or a combination of them. Firstly, the stress on academic excellence make students feel that they are never able to do enough to meet the demands of the examinations. This creates the feelings of guilt and inadequacy so that they feel they are not spending enough time in their work. This feeling is strongly felt when they are partaking in activities not pertinent to their school work such as reading a story book, being involved in uniformed societies, relaxing or helping their parents. As a result of this concern with schoolwork, many of our children have no time for developing other interests and other aspects of their mental growth. Very few students read beyond their school textbooks and some do not even read the newspaper. Their knowledge is confined to what is prescribed in the syllabuses. Our students, with a few exceptions, cannot be said to be educated in the broader sense of education. The level of their conversation is unintellectual and its scope is limited.

Feelings of not spending enough time at their studies can also arise from parents' desire to keep up with the Joneses. Children are dragged from one activity to another so that they have little time for their homework. Parents can be forgiven for giving their children so little leisure time if the intention is to provide them with a all-rounded development. However, in most cases these activities bring little relaxation or enjoyment as they are required to take various tests or examination. Consequently, a child, for instance, may be technically good at playing the piano but derives little excitement and joy from the activity; has neither the appreciation of the music nor the knowledge of the composer and his colourful biography.

A common complaint of students is that they have too much work to do. Granted that they have a great deal of materials to be learned but these materials can be learned in less than a third of the time if only they possess a more efficient and effective study habit. Our students have the tendency to memorize whole chunks of their text. In fact, they want to be word perfect. This, of course, will take a great deal of the learner's time. If they had aimed for understanding and the main points of the text they would have taken a much shorter time to store the information in their memory. Furthermore, this will enable them to retrieve it with greater ease and be more successful in applying it to other situations. These students and, probably, their teachers are unaware that their memory has limited capacity and if the information to be stored exceeds the memory capacity then something has to give way. Either the new information cannot be stored or the already stored information has to give way. If, instead of rehearsing the input or information (i.e. rote-learning or memorization) the learner encodes the input (i.e. the learner tries to understand and make sense of the information) then storage and retrieval are facilitated. By encoding the information it is chunked so that more spaces can be released for more information and, secondly, encoding enables new information to be linked with the old one so that recall is facilitated.

The habit of memorizing text can be attributed to two factors - inability to understand the text and the way students are taught - which, in reality, boils down to one factor - the way students are taught. During my supervision of teacher-trainees I recommend that they spend more time to make sure their students understand what they are teaching. Invariably, the defence is the pressure from the regular teachers to complete the syllabus. The advice that the syllabus can be completed in more than one way (i.e. the topics need not be covered to the same degree of depth and breadth or some topics can be omitted) is often rejected on the ground that principals, parents and even students will complain if topics or even if certain aspects of the topics are omitted. The counter argument, that teaching the difficult topics to the low ability group serves no purpose since these students will still be unable to answer questions set on them and the inability to understand leads to boredom and frustration, is of no avail. It appears that teachers and principals blame parents who, in turn, blame teachers and the educational system. Where do we break into this vicious circle? The best target seems to be the parents as being the clients they should be the ones to demand for quality instead of quantity in their children's education.

The way that students are taught also encourages memorizing facts. Teachers tend to give notes and they even dictate the results of experiments when, if in accordance to the objectives of science education students should be making the observations themselves. Student teachers are asked to adhere to this practise to ensure that the workbooks are clean and neat and the 'correct' answers are recorded. One wonders what is the objective of education? Is it to learn the correct answers? Or is it to train children to be observant and to provide them with opportunities to learn to record or write what they see, to discriminate between important facts and unimportant ones, to make deductions and generalizations, to think logically, to make rational decisions and most important of all, to learn from their mistakes. To me, the development of the children's thinking and reasoning abilities is much more important than the learning of the facts per se. This does not imply that learning the correct fact or answer is not important. It is definitely more important than memorizing wrong information. However, what is much more important in education is the development of the child's cognition. Though giving the correct answer is the most efficient means of giving information this procedure also denies the child the opportunities to acquire the other cognitive processes. Allowing the child to grope her way to the correct answer is an inefficient method only initially. As she acquires the other cognitive skills she becomes more efficient and effective. In considering efficiency, we have also to weigh the acquisition of mere knowledge against the many cognitive skills which the child can acquire through finding her own answer. Furthermore, we have also to consider memory and retrieval of the knowledge which is found to be better retained and more easily recalled when the learner works his way to the correct answer. We must not be short-sighted to sacrifice the long term benefits for short-term gains.

Another cognitive development which is curbed by the way our children is taught is creativity. Teachers who feel the need to complete the syllabus usually have little or no time for either student's questions or their answers. If questions are asked they are for the purpose of assessing how much they have retained and not for the purpose of stimulating pupils' thinking. The answers are predetermined and so the pupils are either correct or wrong. Little or no attempts are made to analyze pupils' answers to ascertain whether they reflect misunderstanding, misconception or a different way of viewing the problem. Teachers (and many adults for the matter) seldom listen to their students. They are more concerned with trying to make students fit into the set moulded than to help them develop intellectually. Instead of trying to identify the uniqueness of each individual and encourage them to develop their potentials they are making them attain the set of goals along the same well-trodden path. Our educational system does not encourage individuality and creativity. Whatever creative potentials a child has are quickly killed by our educational system.

Even the way children are being assessed discourages divergence and creativity. All objective questions have one correct answer and no recognition is given to the child who sees the world differently. The trend is toward objective assessment as this type of evaluation ensures fairness and objectivity. As this type of questions are difficult to set an item bank is created. It, thus, becomes easy to coach a child to pass his national examinations which result in some secondary school children being not able to write a proper sentence. Thus, our assessment technique not only crubs creativity but it also permits undetection of illiteracy. It seems almost a paradox that our educational system which purportedly aims for academic excellence also promotes illiteracy.

This educational system of ours creates several categories of citizens - citizens who are frustrated and possess inferior complex because they fail to attain the academic excellence demanded by the society, citizens who have attained the academic excellence (because of their abilities) but professionally feel they are round pegs in square holes, citizens who have attained their goals but feel inadequate and unfulfilled in other areas of their development, citizens who are satisfied and are prepared to muddle along (being conditioned by the system to accept authority unquestionably), and citizens who feel fulfilled, having attained all their dreams and goals. There is no data to indicate the percentage of citizens in each of these categories and it will be interesting to carry out a survey to ascertain the percentages. While I would not dare to make a guess of the percentages it may be safe for me to say that there is a great deal of wastage of human resources and talents. Firstly our educational system creates in many of us a sense of inadequacy which prevents us from functioning at our optimum. Secondly, our system in promoting and rewarding only academic ability, has prevented the development of the other abilities. Consequently, those citizens whose potentials are not in the academic fields are not only deprived of the actualization of their potentials but are also short changed emotionally. Potentials such as musical, artistic and athletic abilities can bring glory and income to our country. Thirdly, although the educational system rewards academic excellence, paradoxically it hinders intellectual development. As a result the intellectual potentials of many citizens are not fully actualized, even those of the bright students. That is why Malaysia has failed to produce geniuses and highly acclaimed intellectuals. Fourthly, our educational system obstructs the development of creativity. Our country needs creative and resourceful citizens who will be able to place Malaysia in the fore-front of development so that it becomes a leader instead of a follower in knowledge and progress. Lastly, our educational system promotes conformity instead of courage, boldness, confidence and independence. Citizens who are accepting, conforming and insecure lack the courage to experiment and try untrodden paths. Our investigation into the problems of adolescents in Malaysia reveals that many of the adolescents are insecure, lack confidence and are afraid to make mistakes. These dependent, insecure citizens who expect to be assisted and guided are likely to be a liability to the country instead of being contributors towards the rapid development of the country.

I may appear to be highly critical of our educational system. But the intention, as stated earlier in this paper, is not to run down any group but to plead to all concerned with education to have a hard look at our educational system. We should not behave like the ostrich which insists on sticking its head in the sand and is blind and deaf to the changes in its surroundings. Rather, we should be like the ostrich which holds its head boldly in the air so as to be sensitive and alert to its surroundings. We cannot make progress unless we are prepared to be evaluated and criticized. For the curriculum to meet the needs of a dynamic society it has to be constantly reviewed and evaluated. Furthermore, we must be sensitive to the needs of changing times and be prepared to change.

The 'Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah' is a positive step towards the right direction. However, this curriculum will not be able to permit and facilitate the development of children unless they are allowed to develop at their own pace (i.e. the progress of bright students are not reined and slow students are given encouragement to forge ahead instead of receiving criticisms for failing to keep up with the class), curiosity, individuality and creativity are fostered, parents and teachers do not hold on to academic excellence as the primary purpose of education but give importance to the overall development of children.

According to Eric Erikson (1972), there are eight major crises in a person's life span and between the ages of 6 to 12 years the crisis is industry versus inferiority. During this period, children industriously strive to gain mastery over their environment. If they fail to master the competence skills then feelings of inadequacy are imbued which affect the next stage of development which is identify versus confusion. Children who fail to master tasks given to them during the primary school will have difficulties establishing their identities during adolescence. Consequently they become insecure and confused.

The main objective of primary education should be to assist children explore and develop their potentiality and master skills which they wish to attain. Having successfully mastered the skill (or knowledge) they will be motivated to try new territories for nothing succeeds so well as success. In fact, success is the best motivator. Likewise, children in the kindergarten should be given ample opportunities to explore and experiment because the 3 to 6 years-period is the initiative versus guilt period. Therefore, the criterion of a good kindergarten is one which provides children with lots of play activities and not one which teaches children to read, write and do arithmetic.

Once again I would appeal to parents, teachers and adults to treat each child as an individual, to provide a happy, anxiety-free environment for them to grow and develop, to allow them to know themselves, to help them to attain self-actualization and not to place them into a mould shaped by adults. We do not know what potentials a child has and what is in store for him/her. At best, we can only provide a conducive environment for the child to grow and I would like to conclude with these pearls of wisdom from peanut:

If we insist on academic excellence as the ultimate goal of education then what is in store of the D minus child?

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