

## Society needs to take lead in fight against school violence

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THE fundamental tenet of basic education is generally summed up as the 3Rs — reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic.

In some countries however, the 3Rs have come to represent "revolvers, rifles and repeaters" — a frightening reflection of how schools can be a playground for crimes.

Although the situation in Malaysia is still under control, of late, it is getting more worrying.

The local version of 3Rs is fast changing to mean "rascals, rogues and ruffians."

The latest tragic episode involving the death of a pupil in a religious school is a case in point; another testimony of how bad the situation can be.

While bullying and gangsterism in schools are not exactly new, the level of brutality is. Otherwise, they hardly raised an eyebrow, often dismissed as isolated cases.

To throw some light as to what could possibly happen in schools; it is tempting to glean into the bouts of fracas that took place during the recently launched National Service programme.

In many ways, the NS is comparable to schools: in terms of the school-going age group; that they are assembled for a common purpose; supervised and received similar instructions; governed by same set of rules and procedures; donned the standard uniforms — just to cite a few similarities.

Viewed in this way, NS could represent a variation of "schooling" based on some structured modules.

What makes the NS cohorts particularly interesting is that the participants were randomly selected nationwide. This means that the chances of "ready-made" gangs being imported into any one setting are very remote.

As all of them are unfamiliar with the surroundings they were allotted to, their reactions to each could be regarded as "civil" to start of with. In other words, for purpose of a quick comparison, the NS cohorts could be regarded as some sort of a "control" sample.

It could form a basis of understanding what develops subsequently. Moreover, the cohorts supposedly resemble Malaysian demographic for that the same age group.

Now that the fact that there are confirmed cases of indiscipline reported during the NS, it should not be surprising if similar incidences happened in schools, given the similarities cited.

In fact, in terms of proportion to number, the schools seem to fare somewhat better.

In any case, taking into account that schools (and NS) are subsets of the larger Society — its value, habits, and norms, it is also not surprising that they too mirror the same at the societal level.

Indeed, schools are a reflection of the societal wants, for which purpose they are created.

Thus, if society benchmarks quality of life and success by some alphanumeric indices, rather than on meaningful relationships, then schools will aim for the desired targets, even at the expense of developing meaningful relationships.

If society emphasises on meritocracy as a number game (IQ) devoid of any human values and compassion (EQ, emotional quotient), then school also gear itself likewise.

The irony is while employers complained about the students' lack of communicative skills, no one seems to notice that communication is breaking down at the most basic level, namely at home between parents and children.

Similarly, students are often criticised for being inadequate in their command of English, never mind if they too are grossly inadequate to command self-respect.

The focus seems biased on how "marketable" the students are rather than on the students themselves.

There is therefore, a tendency to shift the end-point of education from the capacity to learn to the capacity to gain employment.

As a result, learning gradually changed into something that is boring, dreaded and no longer fun. Unfortunately, until it turns into a violent outburst, the situation will remain unnoticed.

This would be the case for yet another potentially explosive time-bomb — teenage suicide — another form of violence that thus far received little attention. The reality however, it is only a matter of time when suicide will rear its ugly head.

Consider the report coming out of Singapore just last week. It shockingly revealed that suicide rate among teenagers, especially the girls, has reached an unbelievable proportion, purported to be one of the highest in the world (*Sun*, April 5).

As expected, family conflict and study stress are among the main reasons cited.

Singapore has arrived in a sense, and Malaysia looks poised to join this league. In short, when it comes to curbing multi-faceted violence, there is no time to be complacent.

Sure, the police and the army could be muscled in. But not only is this reminiscent of the usual simplistic knee-jerk approach to ban, censor, or cut off the "criminal" body parts, it is also deemed (from previous experiences) to be ineffective as the long-term solution.

Bearing in mind that there can never be quick fixes to overcome intractable, long-term problems (remember triads, drug abuse), one must search for alternative solution.

Foremost, we need to think beyond schools; beyond any one ministry or agency.

We need to re-examine the very fabric of our society that has allowed these to happen for far too long.

The various forms of violence may, after all, represent a desperate cry for help; a reflection of the larger society that has long suffered the same.

The first step perhaps is to rearticulate what keywords such as "success" and "development" mean to us as a nation. And in what terms should we best measure them. Will simple statistical numbers, indices and mere figures do?

Similarly, can the lofty objectives of "*cemerlang*", "*gemilang*", "*terbilang*" be fully grasped just by computing and crunching numbers no matter how complex they are? Therefore, all levels of society must be involved. Otherwise, violence in school (and elsewhere) is here to stay.

Schools and students will continue to be convenient scapegoats for the failure of our society to initiate the "Software Changes" alluded to by the Prime Minister.

Programmes based on 3Rs and NS, will be hard pressed to bring about such important changes when the society itself is reluctant to take the lead.

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