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Lats 'Town Boy' has the answer

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Lat's 'Town Boy' has the answer

To break out of a singular perspective of things, and for all Malaysian kids to learn Bahasa Melayu, the black-and-white pages of the autobiographical comic offers a simple solution.

MY daughter was talking about how hard it is to teach Bahasa Melayu to her non-Malay international school students when I found my eye caught by a book on the living room bookshelves: Lat's *Town Boy*, published almost half a century ago.

When Lat (Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, formally) came out with his first collection, *Lots of Lat*, I made sure to buy it, and subsequently purchased all his other books containing cartoons illustrating anecdotes from his life, as well as his take on issues of the day.

Lat, to me, spoke to a Malaysia that once was ours but has now fallen into the abyss of conservatism and become ensnared in senseless speech, expressions and communications.

We are a changed country now. My daughter is finding it difficult to teach Bahasa Melayu to children who have no Malay friends and whose parents – who also probably don't have (many) Malay friends – ignore the importance of speaking Malay in the country they're living in, which uses it as the official language.

The tragedy of our education system is that non-Malay parents choose vernacular schools or private schools for the safety of their children.

Public schools are a frightening prospect for them – they are, after all, the schools that hog the headlines with bullying cases and careless deaths, and where teachers, who don't understand what being Malaysian is about, focus on a singular perspective.

Well, I came up with a solution to my daughter's problem, and I believe it can also help our education system while contributing to nation-building. It's a simple idea: engineering our children to have multiracial friends – itu saja.

No need for any conferences, a million-ringgit budget, or even a Unity Ministry. Just make sure our children have friends of different cultures.

Before dealing with how to implement this idea, I would like to explain why I thought of it by reminding ourselves of who we once were before we lost the plot.

In *Town Boy*, the cartoonist reveals in his secondary school days, recounting especially the fun he had with his Chinese friend Frankie.

It is interesting to me that Lat focuses on his relationship with this boy more than those he has with others of his own race.

Lat had many friends, as evidenced in his tales of fun with classmates of different races – but Frankie seems more important.

MOHD
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Over the top

Now, *Town Boy* came out almost half a century ago in 1981, and it was a happy sensation then with sales cutting across racial lines.

If it were to be published today though, conservative and ignorant-thinking people would have a field day condemning it for being "insulting to race and religion". Lat would probably have police reports lodged against him, and the book would be pulled off the shelves.

Why would it be deemed "sensitive" today?

Well, there is a full-page drawing of Lat's visit to Frankie's home, which is above a "Kedai Makan Cina". Sadly, that alone would be enough to cause an uproar nowadays on social media.

And then there's the frame of Frankie having his dinner upstairs while Lat is given a "kuih pau". Restaurants in those days

didn't have halal certification, of course, so this would probably cause another useless uproar, like the fuss made by a politician mistakenly thinking "ham" is always made from pork.

Then there is a third page of both boys dancing to – oh no! – Western rock and roll music that would surely raise eyebrows among those who have issues with concerts that do not follow a certain religious value system.

How far we have come!

To me, the main story of *Town Boy* is about a Malay boy and a Chinese boy sharing similar experiences that are divided slightly by socioeconomic levels – Lat's father was a clerk with limited means and Frankie's parents could afford to send him to London for further studies. But friends different from us are what make us rounded individuals as we grow up – that is the point.

Back to my daughter's problem. My grandchildren attend schools run by the progressive Islamic NGO Ikram Malaysia where classes have Malay students. I proposed to my daughter that she organise a workshop over several days and place her international school students in Ikram classes with students at the same level.

Let the children work and play together to the point that they

would have each other's social media contacts. That would be an excellent way for non-Malays to learn to speak Bahasa Melayu – but more importantly, it would be a great way for each group to gain, if not an understanding, at least an awareness of different cultures and perspectives. Language is not only about verbal or written communication. It offers values, beliefs, history and culture.

Would it be too difficult for our public schools to join in some programmes with international schools, as well as vernacular ones, with teacher exchanges and such? Will there be conservative voices warning against the "polluting of minds" by exposure to different religions or races or perspectives? Or can we decide to be Malaysian regardless?

We badly need a *Town Boy* approach in our education system. The sooner the spirit of the mischievous but open-hearted lad permeates our schools, the sooner we can upend the one-tone narrative that now grips this country.

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