

SPEECH BY MR ZAINUDIN NORDIN, MAYOR OF CENTRAL SINGAPORE DISTRICT AND CHAIRMAN OF ONEPEOPLE.SG AT THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION NATIONAL EDUCATION AND CIP SEMINAR 2009, 5 NOVEMBER 2009, 9AM NANYANG POLYTECHNIC

My fellow Parliamentary Colleague, Mr Viswa Sadasivan

Mr Puvan Ariaratnam

Deputy Director, National Education and Planning

NE Practitioners

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

I am pleased to be here today at the National Education and CIP Seminar 2009. It is heartening to see so many of you here taking the time to attend this session. I understand from Puvan that a series of meaningful activities have been lined up for you to enhance your learning journey, so do make the best out of this opportunity. It is also heartening to see our community stakeholders coming together to do their part for National Education. This is indeed a step in the right direction.

The Importance of National Education

2 I find today's theme for the seminar apt in reflecting on our cause and mission of National Education. A child spends a minimum of 10 years of his life in school. These 10 years will instill foundations, build him as a citizen and shape his destiny. The question is how do we make the best out of these 10 years? What potential do we see in this child, and how as educators can we best nurture his growth as an individual and as an active citizen? In my view, it is the articulation of this vision that sets the precepts of National Education.

3 The true value of National Education stands in its ability to provide a holistic education to our youth. Education is not just about grades and doing well in school. It has a higher goal of building character and values in our young. As NE educators, you have the privilege to inspire our next generation to be passionate about our nation's cause and the ideals of this country. Such is the indelible mark you leave on our young minds.

Racial Harmony- Challenges

4 Singapore is now in its 50th year since attaining self-government. We have come a long way since the 50s and 60s.

History has taught us that we should never walk the path of racial strife that had gripped the nation once in turmoil. Since then, our founding fathers have put in place sound policies that continue to lay the bedrock of harmony in our nation. Racial and Religious Harmony is fundamental to Singapore's growth and prosperity. While we have good national policies, it is eventually the people who will define the extent of the harmony we will achieve in years to come.

5 Racial harmony is a topic close to my heart. Besides being the Mayor for Central Singapore District, I chair OnePeople.sg, the national body for Racial Harmony and serve as a Member of Parliament for my constituency. In my interactions with people from different walks, and hearing their views on racial harmony, I get a feel that as a community we do show a high level of tolerance towards our different ethnic groups and religious communities. From the riots of the past, this is considerable progress. But moving forward, tolerance is not what we should aspire towards. We should move beyond tolerance to understanding and appreciation of our different cultures. As tolerance, as you and I know, has a limit. If the tolerance level is breached, what lies next?

6 Let me share an incident at my Meet the People session to illustrate my point. (Mayor to share an incident of racial conflict,)

7 There are always challenges that we will face as a multi-racial and multi-religious nation. Our Prime Minister in his recent National Day Rally touched on potential cracks that may appear in our social fabric if we do not take heed of the underlying symptoms of potential discord. Let me touch on three key challenges.

Integration

8 We are facing an era of globalisation. We can no longer stay isolated. Events which happen around us will affect us and can trigger our emotions, especially when it is of sensitive issues concerning race and religion.

9 Globalisation has drawn a considerable number of new citizens to Singapore. This has led to some discomfort on the ground. There is a sense that Singaporeans are feeling crowded out and jobs are being lost to new migrants. This coupled with the communication barriers have created simmering tensions on the ground between locals and new citizens. Integration between new citizens and

Singaporeans is a key concern. We are no longer dealing with just inter-racial gaps but one which is intra-racial as well.

10 Our new citizens, do open up new possibilities and provide the necessary talent to enrich Singapore and give our nation a competitive edge. However, we cannot ignore sentiments on the ground. The Prime Minister did recently announce the slowdown in the pace of attracting new citizens to our country. However, we must understand that the policy of attracting new talent is for the long haul, and our common spaces have to grow beyond locally bred Singaporeans to include our new neighbours to bridge the gap.

11 It is therefore important for our National Education to teach our young the value of embracing diversity. We must allow opportunity for new migrants who attend our schools to mix with our locals, trade cultures and build friendships. Our youths need to cultivate this mindset of welcoming diversity and embracing different points of view and perceptions. Likewise, our new citizens should also learn to reciprocate. While we share a common thread as Singaporeans, our uniqueness is derived from our diverse cultures, food and traditions. This is what makes Singapore, a vibrant city.

Rising Religiosity

12 There is a global wave of rising religiosity which has reached our shores. People are becoming more religious. Religion in itself has a positive impact on people. And I must add that there is nothing wrong in us being more religious. Religion gives us a moral purpose and provides a sanctum of solace and comfort. In a multi-religious country such as Singapore, however, we must remember to maintain our common secular space. This is the only way we can sustain our social cohesion.

13 While rising religiosity becomes a way of life, we must be cautious of its undesirable side-effects such as aggressive proselytisation or closing up of religious communities with little interaction between each group. We must be careful not to allow religion to encroach the common space. Only then can we interact freely without any inhibitions. As educators, we have a responsibility to keep our schools secular. Our children should be taught to respect one's religion and not to push their religious beliefs onto others. They should understand that while they subscribe to their religious beliefs, they should not impose on nor ridicule the faith of another. Respect

for one's race and religion should always be observed as a key pillar of National Education.

New Media

14 The third challenge confronting us is the advent of the new media. Our youth are now much more connected than what we were before. The language of the youth resides in Facebook, Sms, Blogs, YouTube, Twitter and more. Youths have re-discovered the art of abbreviation. Sentences are becoming words, and words in turn become syllables. I used to recall there was a word Ok, which I thought was fairly short, now its often referred to as "k" and it somehow means the same thing.

15 The new media is fast, powerful and viral. The emergence of digital technology has made it possible for anybody to spread a malicious message with great speed and momentum while remaining anonymous. If not checked or verified, information which is inaccurate or worse mischievous can poison minds and alter perceptions with great effect. Singapore has seen a fair share of such incidents with a recent account of a well-educated youth charged for posting discriminatory remarks of another race in his blog. On the other

hand, there have been cases worldwide as well as one in Singapore, where we have self-made terrorists radicalised through the internet. In the case of Singapore, again we had a well educated youth who surfed terrorist websites, was taken in by their ideologies and was on the verge of being trained by foreign militants before he was caught. There are sites that promote terrorist ideologies and we should be mindful that such websites prey on impressionable minds.

16 The threat of the new media is evident. It is our duty to educate our youths on the responsible use of the new media. They should learn to verify information from reliable sources rather than choosing to accept readily what they read via the net. They must learn to distinguish fact from fiction and check with educators like yourselves. While the new media has its risks, it also is an effective medium to connect with our youth. Facebook YouTube and Blogs serve as excellent tools to spread our NE messages in a way that may appeal to our youth. These are platforms with a pervasive multiplier effect and we should take full advantage of these avenues. In essence, the new media is a double edge sword. We should blunt the edge that hurts and sharpen the edge that will reinforce the essence of our community spirit.

National Education – An Experiential Journey

17 I for one feel that National Education will best serve its cause when it is felt more than taught. National Education must be an experience where students are able to internalise what they learn. Learning in true sense of the word must go beyond the text.

18 My CDC for example, offers the Trust-Home Programme where students visit the homes of families of different ethnic groups to interact and appreciate first hand the unique aspects of their traditions, customs, and values, and how these are being practiced in their daily lives.

19 At OnePeople, camps such as “Explorations in Ethnicity” and the “Race and Diversity Awareness Programme” challenges the assumptions of the typical stereotypes that we have of another race or religion, and dispels misconceptions through experiential learning. These camps also provide opportunities for youths from different backgrounds to bond through shared experiences. OnePeople also offers courses for NE educators to understand deeper issues pertaining to race relations and explore novel ways to introduce diversity awareness activities in the classroom setting. The

OnePeople Portal in collaboration with the National Board serves as a rich resource base for research and a one-stop online platform to seek useful information that will supplement National Education in schools.

20 There is a wealth of organisations that provide you with meaningful avenues to enrich the quality of National Education. Such initiatives enable you to offer greater exposure and depth in charting the educational journey for your pupils. Do take advantage of these opportunities and explore the limitless possibilities.

Conclusion

21 For the NE Framework to remain relevant and current, there must be a closer link between schools and the community. Educators must possess reliable ground intelligence in order for an effective transfer of learning to take place. Students must be aware of current affairs and issues which the community at large is facing. Concurrently, the NE Framework must remain robust so as to enable our young to safeguard our values and identity. If this noble intent is cascaded to every single student, I am confident National Education in our schools will see greater heights.

I wish you a fruitful seminar.

Thank you.