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SEMINAR ON THE RESTRUCTURED EDUCATION SYSTEM
SPEECH BY DR LEE CHIAW MENG, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

Tuesday, 13 Mar 75, 1130 hrs
Raffles Institution

1 Since my announcement on the restructuring of the education system on November 28 last year there have been many views expressed and questions posed by both individuals and organisations on this matter. I am happy to note that the teachers' unions have taken time to consider the matter in detail and to make known their professional views. A dialogue has also been established between these teachers' unions and my Ministry on the restructuring so that consultations and discussions concerning implementation other attendant problems may be held frequently. Useful comments on our education system are always welcome from the professionals and members of the public.

2 The Government's decision to restructure the education system is a firm one. The objectives of the exercise and the major changes to be effected have been clearly spelt out. Only the details remain to be worked out, and these details must conform with the broad principles already laid down.

3 Gathering from the comments received, it is clear that there is general support for the change. There are however, various views as to how it should be implemented. Therefore, I should like to take this opportunity to clarify a few misconceptions and misinterpretations about the restructuring.

4 First, there will not be any national test at the end of primary three. A state-wide test at the end of primary three would, in practice, mean that the PSLE and all its attendant anxiety and problems will be brought forward from Primary Six to Primary Three, thereby defeating the purpose of the November announcement that 'schooling should be made a more meaningful and enjoyable experience'. The announcement also pointed out clearly that the decision whether a pupil should complete the primary course in the normal period of 7 years or in the shortened period of 6 years will be made 'on the basis of a continual assessment of his academic performance'. The key words are 'continual assessment'. This assessment which will be made by individual schools and teachers is meant to be diagnostic but not predictive. That is, it is used to help the teacher and the parent to understand the child better, to know how far he has progressed at that point of time and to see what further help and guidance he needs. It is not meant, and never will be used, to 'brand' a child as intelligent, average or dull.

5 Second, it does not mean that all those who complete the primary course in 6 years will proceed to the general education stream, while those who take 7 years will go for vocational training. Both the 6-year and 7-year groups will have exactly the same opportunity of being channelled to the type of secondary education and training according to their interest and aptitude. There is really no special advantage in forcing a child to complete the normal 7-year primary course in the shortened period of 6 years. This is because the curriculum covered will be the same, the end-of-course examination will be identical and the secondary school course a child will take does not in any way depend on the length of his primary education.

6 Third, it will be possible, and there will be many opportunities, for primary pupils to switch between the 7-year course and the 6-year course and for secondary pupils to switch between various streams. This is in keeping with the spirit of the restructuring that pupils should progress at their own rate and study courses most suited to their ability and interests.

7 Fourth, there will be flexibility in the implementation of the restructuring. Both principals and teachers are expected to exercise a fair degree of discretion. We are educationists. We are not production managers of factories, we need not follow rigid production manuals.

8 Fifth, I wish to reiterate that only those pupils 'who are GENUINELY incapable of becoming effectively bilingual' -- and I believe the number will be very small -- will have reduced second language exposure and will not be expected to do as well in in the second language as other pupils. They are the exception. Most likely they will be put into special classes.

9 Finally, and most importantly, a change of attitude towards education on the part of parents, teachers, principals and educational administrators is necessary for the implementation of the restructuring of the education system. For example, children should not be forced to complete the primary education in 6 years. In fact, there is every advantage in having a child complete his primary education in the normal 7 years. This is because he will be given time to enjoy his study, to develop his interests and abilities at a more leisurely pace and to grow up with self-confidence. Such steady and unhurried growth is of far greater importance to his future life as an adult than the fact that he has completed his primary education in 6 years.

10 .The past detailed PSLE results obtained by pupils in an individual school -- especially the number of pupils who completed the primary in 6 years and who obtained clear passes in all subjects at the first attempt -- will serve as a useful guide to the principal and his teachers with respect to the number of pupils who may be able to complete the primary education in 6 years. The Examination Section has just completed a detailed analysis of the 1974 PSLE results. Generally, there is a fairly good correlation between the actual results and those predicted by schools. The analysis of individual school together with the national average will be given to principals concerned.

11 Education must be viewed as a means of developing a child's innate potential for his own good and for the benefit of the society. Education must take different forms, progress at different rates and lead to many different occupations. We must plant the right seed in the right soil and nurture it to full flowering. This is where the results of your deliberations in the last 3 weeks and during this Seminar will be of great value to everyone concerned.