NEW STRAITS TIMES

Five ways to fix public education system in Malaysia

By Zarina Nalla - January 30, 2024 @ 1:12pm



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EDUCATION is a basic human right, akin to food, shelter and health. Public education plays a pivotal role in ensuring social mobility and breaking the cycle of poverty for children in Malaysia, particularly those who are not privileged.

In transforming education, the quality of basic primary and secondary education is crucial to public education and deserves urgent attention.

The controversial Dual Language Programme (DLP), a contested aspect of public education, has been a source of confusion and debate since 2016. While in theory, it allows the study of Mathematics and Science in either English or Bahasa Malaysia, its implementation has faced challenges.

Some schools are reversing the policy due to difficulties in meeting BM-language proficiency targets. The Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) suggests maintaining the choice and increasing Bahasa Malaysia programmes in schools with weaker proficiency.

Others worry that their children may not be able to compete globally if this trajectory continues. Excelling in Bahasa Malaysia at the expense of the English language may not be wise as prized employers value good spoken and written English. Clearly this is one thorny issue which has not been settled.

Affluent parents opting for private education over national schools contribute to a widening gap between socioeconomic classes. Addressing this trend is crucial for

fostering a more equitable education system, ensuring that quality education is accessible to all, regardless of financial status.

At the same time, we have the Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia (2015-2025) which is meant to be in sync with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, aimed at transforming our education system through to 2025.

However, the effectiveness of these plans is questionable. There is a need for practical implementation, with a focus on holistic improvements rather than selective achievements.

Perhaps targets for urban schools might be different from rural ones and it is key to monitor the removal of barriers to education, especially in basic matters such as lack of electricity or Internet access.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, poor quality online teaching was most likely responsible for 30,000 students missing their SPM examination.

Teachers were unfamiliar with digital platforms, and remote learning tools could not capture the attention of students, as such remote learning became almost impossible. School closures were very disruptive.

Racial harmony is another fundamental element in this debate. National schools of yesteryear are almost non-existent, where the number of students and teachers were racially well-represented.

Whether or not vernacular schools help in strengthening the social fabric of the nation begs a separate and nuanced discussion to foster inclusivity and diversity within the education system.

The pivotal question is: what stands between us and the end -goal of providing a reasonably sound primary and secondary education a critical foundation for every citizen? We are the ones responsible in creating barriers to education.

Collectively, we have lost sight that students are the most important recipients and we forget that our precious teachers carry the most important torch: they feed the minds of our young ones and deserve special attention.

The heart of a successful education system lies in its teachers. With that in mind, all eyes from the ministry and other stakeholders such as parent groups should be focused on this one goal: ensuring that the quality of teaching is carefully monitored and nurtured.

This one major objective demands the following five deliverables:

1. Ensuring the teaching career is attractive, not a last-resort or a dumping ground;

2. Learn to recognise good teachers. Those who are passionate about their work, deeply care for all their students regardless of their backgrounds and imbibe their students with universally-accepted values;

3. Teachers who are excellent should be celebrated openly and well-rewarded;

4. Training tools should be sharpened constantly, so that teachers can upgrade their skills and must be allowed to apply whatever new teaching instruments they have acquired; and,

5. Public education, especially throughout the primary and secondary years, is sacred and must not be politicised. It should be a no-go zone.

We must work with the current resources at hand. We have the teachers, students, the text books and magic can happen in the classroom if we have dynamic and impactful teachers.

The attention of the students will be captured and as long as the learning experience is captivating then our children will enjoy going to school. It all boils down to the teachers, who enjoy their work and are allowed to do what they do best: teach enthusiastically and uninterrupted.

To achieve the end goal of providing a sound primary and secondary education, a concerted effort is needed to remove barriers, address language policy concerns, bridge socioeconomic gaps and empower teachers.

By focusing on the effective implementation of these areas, Malaysia can build a robust education system that fosters inclusivity, excellence and a love for learning among its students.

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