NEW STRAITS TIMES

Prioritise thinking skills in revamping our education system

By DR AHMAD IBRAHIM - February 13, 2024 @ 12:20pm



In the budget, education is allocated the highest amount. And almost 80 per cent goes to pay teachers. - NSTP file pic, AI-generated image

MANY are concerned about the state of our education system. Not just parents, but also our leaders. The prime minister himself recently raised the issue of the poor state of our education system.

So much so that many children have become disinterested in studying now, many would rather work than pursue tertiary studies.

Nothing wrong with the gig economy. But what will be the repercussions on the nation's future? There is no denying that good talent is critical in nation building. Not just for the economy.

It is also important for the wellbeing and sustainability of the nation. A conversation with several of the nation's veteran educationists threw some light on the deteriorating state of our education system.

Some ideas were shared on how to reverse the decline. There were many questions. Answers were too few. We are not short of blueprints. But we do not implement them as planned. We seldom monitor the roll-out. We, therefore, do not analyse and evaluate. We also do not share the analysis and review the findings to improve the plan.

More often, we just store away the findings in some cabinet, instead of putting them to the test of public scrutiny. Questions have been raised as to whether our teachers are adequately trained to deliver the plan.

Many are saying that teaching is seen as a profession of last resort. Few deny this. Can't we make teaching a profession of first choice? The truth is we do not have

enough well-trained teachers. Apparently, the costs of employing adequate teachers can be prohibitive.

In the budget, education is allocated the highest amount. And almost 80 per cent goes to pay teachers.

Many also raise the issue of too much bureaucracy in the system. Not a few have suggested that schools be given more autonomy to execute the agreed plan and blueprint.

There are headmasters and teachers who have demonstrated much creativity in implementation of lessons but often they are not given the liberty to experiment with new ways of teaching.

The issue of leadership was raised as a concern. Many of the problems in the system can be traced back to poor leadership. This is further exacerbated by the frequent change in approach as leaders change. There is no certainty that the national education blueprint will be followed through with vigour as new leadership assumes charge.

They say learning is best achieved when there is joy in what you are doing. Is schooling no more fun? Those days, we would look forward to going back to school after each term break.

Learning science, or for that matter any discipline, is best achieved by doing practical work on the subject or discipline. Apparently, most schools lack proper laboratory facilities.

Even those with labs do not use them much. Why? But what has become clear is that education in the country is no more inclusive. For the rich, they can afford other options. The ones who suffer are the B40 and some among the M40. This is not healthy for the nation.

We need to go back to the real objective of education, which is to build citizens of good character who show confidence and are capable of thinking through issues. We did deliver this at one time in the past. That was the reason why many FDIs chose Malaysia then. Why can't we bring back that system?

Of course, we need to put into consideration the changing technologies. We are still behind in digitalising education. By strengthening the digital practices in schools, students will not be burdened with lugging so many textbooks to schools. We talk too much about innovation. But we do not practise much innovation in education.

There is no denying that good quality education is the root solution to much of the nation's problems. The education system should focus on building positive character traits and emphasise nurturing moral values and virtues too.

The development of other industry driven skills should be left to on-the-job training. It is a fact that we learn faster and better by practising what we have learnt.

The same applies to education. We must create more practical learning tools rather than load students excessively with the theoretical stuff. Rote learning is out. Let us instead emphasise thinking skills. The way to a great nation is to get our education system right.

The writer is a professor at the Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI Policy, UCSI University