

COMMENT | Unwise to increase salaries of all teachers

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COMMENT | Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek's call on May 27, 2023, to increase the salaries of all teachers with higher qualifications is expensive, misguided, and would not solve the critical problems facing Malaysian schools, specifically declining standards.

On the contrary, that would only aggravate them. This tendency to institute a general solution instead of focusing on specific problems is, alas, typical of Malaysian policymaking.

Fadhlina's proposal would result only in more of those with higher qualifications in Islamic Studies and Malay Studies becoming teachers. You do not need them as there is already a glut. The pressing shortage is in teachers (with or without higher qualifications) of English and STEM subjects. This is most acute in rural schools.

Instead, give extra allowances only to teachers of English and STEM. That targeted approach would be less expensive, more effective, and not carry the

permanent burden of a salary increase. You could reduce or remove those allowances once conditions improve. You cannot reduce salaries with ease.

Grant an allowance of 25 percent of basic salary to those qualified to teach English or STEM, an additional 25 percent if they were to be posted in a rural school, and another 25 percent if they have higher qualifications in those subjects.

Thus a math teacher with a Master's degree teaching at Sekolah Kebangsaan Ulu Kelantan would increase her emolument by 75 percent. Incentive enough! That would boost the teaching in those schools.

Go beyond and provide quarters for these hard-to-get teachers. Many schools have these quarters but they are occupied by religious studies teachers. Again you do not need incentives for them.

Re-examine the syllabus

Beyond special allowances and living quarters, re-examine the national syllabus. It is overloaded with sterile Islamic Studies and "soft" subjects like civics.

I have no issues with the former if that would make these students fluent in Arabic. It is always beneficial to be bilingual, no matter what the second

language.

However, Islamic Studies in Malaysia is less education, more indoctrination. Critical thinking is not encouraged; that is bidaah (adulteration of the faith). You are to blindly accept the status quo, and be graded on that.

Heed the wisdom of Munshi Abdullah. He likened a child's mind to a parang, and teachers are to sharpen it. With a sharp parang you could hack your way out of the thick jungle or carve an exquisite work of sculpture.

Islamic Studies teachers, however, treat their students as dustbins to be filled with dogmas. The most you could get out of that is what you had put in, minus what would inevitably be lost or stuck to the bottom. That is also Paulo Freire's criticism of what he referred to as the bank account model of education.

There is minimal critical thinking or probing questions posed in Islamic education, even at the graduate level in Malaysia and most Islamic countries. No surprise that the discipline today flourishes and the brightest Islamic minds are found only at Western universities, where critical thinking and inquisitive analyses are the norm.

There is a price to pay for the current unenlightened Malaysian education, and that is borne disproportionately by Malays. It is a tragedy to see so many bright

young Malay minds rotting in national and religious schools being deprived of a progressive education. That precious few become successful are the exceptions.

Strengthen the curriculum by having Malay, English, Science, and Mathematics be taught daily. It is no surprise that an increasing number of Malay parents opt for Chinese schools for their children to escape the intellectual oppressiveness of national and religious schools.

That flow would become a torrent if leaders of these vernacular schools were to be enlightened enough to change the names of their schools to Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Mandarin), linking more to language, not race. For added measure, have halal canteens, name these schools after Malay heroes, and have Muslim teachers from China to teach Islamic Studies.

Education Minister Fadhlina and her advisers should work on a focused policy targeted at the most pressing problems. There are plenty of those.

Though outside her purview, consider that with the country desperate for teachers of English, yet not a single public university has a dedicated Department of English. Nor is there an English-medium Teachers' College.

She should not try to solve all problems. Be more modest with your aspirations, and most of all, be realistic about your capabilities.

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