

POLICY IDEAS N° 4

Giving Voice to the Poor

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The gap between the rich and the poor is real when it comes to education policy-making. The bottom 40% ... is not properly represented in these processes.

Summary

This report documents the main findings from Stage I (out of 4) of the “Voice of the Poor” research project, whose aim is to provide a bridge between the bottom 40% of with policy-makers and other key stakeholders in education policy.

As can be expected, poor families have high aspirations for their children, and social mobility is a vision shared by all.

Among the major challenges faced by poor families are (1) additional fees charged by schools exacerbate their financial constraints, (2) peer group pressure, (3) parents are ill-equipped to help their children with school work, (4) discriminatory school environment, (5) bad or underperforming teachers, and (6) language barrier in vernacular schools.

Poor parents see themselves as being trapped in a weak government school system. Since they cannot afford private schools, they rely on private tuitions to cover the shortcomings of government schools.

Poor parents from different ethnic backgrounds show different attitudes towards the vocational system. They also worry about the ethnic segregation that their children have to endure.

Children who belong to the lowest income groups suffer the worst consequences of lower quality education. They do not have the advantage of being able to opt for a private education system or a better school outside of the area that they live in, nor do they have adequate access to alternative sources of education such as the internet and private tuitions. If neglected, they will continue to live in a vicious cycle that keeps them in their current socio-economic

condition, thus hampering the country’s mission to improve the living conditions of the bottom 40%.

Understanding the challenges faced by parents in this segment is crucial in developing a better education system that can adapt itself to the needs of the group that require the most help. Unfortunately, this is also the very group that is most frequently neglected in any policy consultations.

It would be inappropriate to expect

the poor and underprivileged to attend consultations that are held far away from their villages or estates because it is too costly for them to travel great distances. Even if they do manage to attend, they may not be articulate enough to make their voices truly heard in such public meetings. As a result, policies are frequently influenced by middle-class city folk, while the poor and underprivileged continue to be left out.

The gap between the rich and the poor is evident when it comes to education policy-making. The bottom 40% – whose monthly income is less than RM2000 per month according to the 10th Malaysia Plan – is not properly represented in these processes.

IDEAS and arise Asia embarked on the “Voice of the Poor” project to give voice to the bottom 40%. Our aims are twofold:

1. To provide a voice for the poor and underprivileged in national education policy-making process
2. To help the public policymakers, corporations and foundations understand the needs and aspirations of the bottom 40% in education.

About the “Voice of the Poor” research project

This research project is divided into four stages. Only Stage I has been completed and is reported here.

Stage I: Focus groups

Seven focus group discussions (FGD) were held to identify salient issues that require further

examination in later stages of the study. Our respondents consist of fathers and mothers, aged between 25 and 40, with at least one child currently in primary or secondary school. They all self-classify themselves as the decision-maker in the family when it comes to school issues. The household income of all respondents is below RM2000 for those living in urban/semi-urban areas, and below RM1500 for those from rural areas.

We discovered that many of our targeted respondents were more comfortable talking in their own mother-tongue. Therefore, to overcome the language barrier, we decided to hold language-specific FGDs at the locations specified in Table I below:

Stage 2 – Quantitative nationwide survey

Key issues identified in Stage I will be used to devise a questionnaire which will be administered to low-income parents from across Malaysia. We will use a face-to-face survey methodology to ensure completeness. A minimum of 1200 respondents will be interviewed, thereby ensuring that the survey

findings will be considered statistically significant.

Stage 3 – Validation roundtables and final analysis

Following Stage 2, we will conduct a further two roundtable discussions with invited stakeholders to delve deeper into the identified issues and fine-tune our final recommendations.

Stage 4 - Knowledge dissemination

The findings and final recommendations of the study will be disseminated to key stakeholders and the relevant policy-makers.

About this report

This report documents the findings of Stage I of our study. It is important that readers do not make generalisations based on this report or assume that these findings are ‘final’ because our intention is simply to document our findings from the seven FGDs that we have conducted as early indications of what we have found.

A more robust conclusion that could lead to concrete policy proposals will be made in the final

| Category | Language (Ethnicity) | Location | Date | No. of people attended |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| Urban / Semi-Urban in Peninsular Malaysia | Bahasa Melayu (Malay) | Morib, Selangor | 23 Sept 2012 | 9 |
| | Tamil (Indian) | Batu Caves, Selangor | 24 Sept 2012 | 8 |
| | Chinese (Chinese) | Tanjung Sepat, Selangor | 25 Sept 2012 | 8 |
| Rural Peninsular Malaysia | Tamil (Indian) | Seremban, Negeri Sembilan | 11 Oct 2012 | 9 |
| | Chinese (Chinese) | Tapah, Perak | 17 Oct 2012 | 9 |
| | Bahasa Melayu (Malay and Orang Asli) | Machang, Kelantan | 19 Oct 2012 | 10 |
| East Malaysia - Rural | Malay (Indigenous ethnic groups) | Kota Kinabalu, Sabah | 14 Oct 2012 | 9 |

Table I: Distribution of the focus groups

research report, which will be produced once all the stages of this project have been completed and a more thorough investigation has been conducted.

In this report, we will also highlight some issues that need further investigation in the subsequent stages of this project.

Some early key findings

What does the bottom 40% want from the education system?

We found that parental aspirations for their children can be generally grouped as follows:

To be successful in life – Our respondents seem to subscribe to a rather unified definition of success, which include doing well in school examinations, to be able to use exam results to obtain a steady job with regular income after the completion of formal education, and with that income, to be able to independently take care of themselves without being dependent on their parents. Our respondents also aspire to see their children not being restricted to the manual work many of them are doing now. To them, a “good job” would be office-type positions in bigger towns and cities. They also see the ability to master multiple languages, particularly English, as a key contributing factor to this success.

To be prepared for working life – Our respondents place a lot of emphasis on ensuring that their children gain sufficient knowledge and skills from school, in the hope that they will be financially independent after completing formal education. They

see school as a place that should prepare their children for work, not just for intellectual development. The ultimate focus is clearly on employment.

To experience holistic education – Our respondents would like to see their children become responsible adults, with good character and strong spiritual beliefs. Schools should provide holistic education and not just be focused on exam results.

The three main aspirations above are, admittedly, rather generic aspirations. It is very likely that these aspirations are shared by all parents regardless of income group, not just the bottom 40%.

An interesting point to highlight here is that our respondents clearly consider good employment the ultimate measure of educational success. Getting a good job is the most important target for these parents. Clearly they understand that good education is among the most important factors that can free their children from the shackles of poverty, and obtaining good exam results is a pre-requisite for social mobility.

At the same time, in the quest to move up the ladder, they emphasise the importance of good character and moral values.

Major challenges faced by the bottom 40%

1. Additional fees exacerbating their financial constraints

Perhaps unsurprisingly, money is the most frequently-cited problem faced by our respondents. Even though all our respondents send their children to government schools, which are supposedly free, they actually end

“Children can accept that they can’t get what they want, but as parents, we feel sad when we can’t afford the things.”
(Malay parent from semi-urban area)

“Like others, we wish our children to become lawyers, doctors or any of those highly paid professionals. But we can’t afford the education.”

(Chinese parent from rural area)

up paying quite a significant amount relative to their income for school-related costs.

They cited the following items as some of the compulsory fees they have to pay: revision books, work books, note books, annual dinner fee, school infrastructure fee (yuran keceriaan sekolah), sport activities fee, compulsory additional classes fee (yuran kelas tambahan wajib), computer and IT fees, and PIBG fee.

Our respondents are unsure if there are rules about what schools can or cannot charge. In most circumstances, they will find a way to pay simply out of obligation and without questioning.

Of course, there are some unavoidable costs such as transportation between home to school, the costs of buying school uniforms, school shoes and school bags, and money to buy food from the school canteen during break time.

Some of our respondents added that their children had to quit school after Form 3 because the costs have become unaffordable. These parents regret the fact that they cannot afford to send their children to continue studying even if they did relatively well at school. Thus despite aspiring to see their children move out from the poverty trap, social mobility is not an option for them because they cannot afford it.

2. Children mixing with the wrong peer group

Some parents stated that bad influences and peer pressure also made some children leave school early. Most of these children prefer to look for work instead of

continuing their studies to Form 5.

Additionally, our Tamil-speaking Indian respondents identified gangsterism as an increasingly worrying factor that they have to deal with. Other respondents did not mention specifically the problem of gangsterism, but they complained about how their children are making friends with peers who do not always bring positive influence. This is particularly bad in rural areas where youngsters do not have much else to do. Some even complained that their children played truant due to peer influence.

3. Parents are not knowledgeable enough to help their own children

All of our respondents are clearly passionate about the quality of education their children are receiving. And they clearly are trying to do the best that they can to support their children.

Unfortunately almost all of them feel that they are not well-educated enough to help their children in their studies. They simply did not know how to help with homework and exam preparation.

One father told us that his daughter is now in secondary school but he himself did not finish primary school, which makes him feel helpless when his daughter asks for guidance.

4. Discriminatory school environment

Schools discriminate against weak students

Some of our respondents complained about the differential treatments received by their children at school due to their children’s academic weaknesses. Parents, particularly those who

send their children to Sekolah Kebangsaan and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (as opposed to vernacular schools), feel that teachers give more attention to better performing students because these students can help the school perform well in national examinations. As a result, their children, who are weaker students, are neglected. They see this as a form of discrimination against their children.

The parents cited cases of teacher absenteeism which they claim is particularly bad for teachers tasked with teaching weaker children. If not absent, some teachers were clearly not putting in their full effort to support weaker students.

These parents also feel that it is ironic that the better performing students receive more teacher support and additional classes. They feel that, from a logical perspective, surely more resources and teaching-time should be allocated to help the weaker students. In fact, there are also attitude differences between teachers in the same school, with some teachers preferring to focus more on better students and ignoring weaker students, despite them being in the same class.

We are not worthy: Division by class

Our respondents actually shared many constructive ideas on how to improve the learning environment in schools. But there seems to be fractured communication channels between the parents and school authorities. There is a general lack of involvement from these parents in matters of school governance and administration.

Most of them do attend school-

wide meetings such as those organised by the school's Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru (PIBG). But very few participate actively in the meetings or other school activities due to a deeply-rooted perception that their views are of less relevance and importance. Most of our respondents rarely, if ever, meet teachers or the school head to discuss the academic progress of their children. A few parents expressed concern that if they were to ask too many questions, their children will be victimised by teachers.

They admitted that one of the factors preventing their active engagement is the limited spare time that they have due to strenuous work hours. But more strikingly, there is also a sense of detachment because they feel the schools' bureaucracies are unwelcoming. There is also a significant communication barrier, especially among non-Malay parents, because most of the teachers are only fluent in Malay. Plus, we saw signs that parents feel they are not in a position to question teachers' actions – in some cases they are made to feel this by teachers – due to their own low education level. The combination of these factors exacerbates their detachment from the school.

5. Not all teachers are good teachers

In addition to these points about teacher preferences and absenteeism our respondents also highlighted various other complaints about teachers' attitudes, such as:

- Exhibiting racism and favouring certain ethnicities above others;

“My child only goes to school 3 times a week because she says that the teachers do not come into class to teach.”

(Chinese parent from semi-urban area)

- Going overboard with physical punishment, with one parent claiming that her child was strangled in class as a punishment;
- Giving demeaning treatment to students because they were late in paying certain fees;
- Unable to distinguish between lazy students and students who need additional help and have learning difficulties.

Some of our respondents who send their children to private tuition classes raised an intriguing issue. Their children claim that the same teachers teach better in private tuition classes compared to when they are teaching in schools. This raises an issue about teachers' attitude when they know they can make extra money outside of the classroom.

We did not ask our respondents to substantiate their claims because we wanted them to speak freely in the FGD, but these were some examples of the issues they raised and they clearly need further investigation in the next stage of this project.

6. Language barriers resulting from vernacular primary school

This problem was raised by parents who sent their children to vernacular primary schools, and have now moved on to national secondary schools. It was more significantly reported by the Tamil-speaking Indians who say that their children are unable to understand Malay and this produces negative effects on all the subjects in secondary school.

The parents feel that the current Bahasa Malaysia language syllabus in SRJK is inadequate to build a strong foundation that can prepare their children for national secondary school.

Some 'big-picture' observations

1. Attitude towards the government school system

Many respondents feel that their children are trapped in a government school system that does not necessarily provide adequate learning experience that can prepare and motivate them to succeed in life. They feel that government schools are not adequately meeting the learning requirements of weaker students.

Our respondents say that schools give greater attention to higher-performing students. This attention could be in the form of provision of homework, additional tuition classes outside of formal school hours, and preference for using the school's IT facilities. But the weaker students, who actually need as much additional support as they can get, are not equally supported. Some teachers are reluctant to teach classes with weak students. One parent said that her child had even returned home early saying "Cikgu tak mau ajar kita hari ini/The teacher doesn't want to teach us today)."

Many respondents shared their concerns on teacher effectiveness in government schools. They feel it is ironic that underperforming teachers are sent to their schools when the government already knows that their school is not doing well. Equally ironic are

situations where the best teachers are appointed to the best classes, whereas these parents feel that the weaker classes would benefit more from having better teachers.

The parents also spoke about the obsession of teachers and administrators in government schools with examination results. They say teachers are not committed to educating poor performers. "Most of the headmasters are aiming for the results of the school. That is why they only focus on good students," one respondent argued. Others agreed, adding that "they want to maintain their school's prestige, not to ensure that all children learn."

2. Attitude towards private education

Perhaps an indication of a widening gap in national education inequity, most respondents believe that attaining quality education in Malaysia has become the privilege of affluent families alone.

The majority of parents perceive private schools to be better than government schools. They believe that private schools have smaller class sizes, and better teachers who have a closer relationship with students and are able to provide quality time when needed. They also believe that students who go to private schools have a better future because they are usually able to master multiple languages, especially English.

These parents also see students who go to private schools as being more able to mix with people from different ethnic groups because of the multi-racial nature of those schools. They feel that their children are not benefitting

from the multi-ethnic environment, and there are divisions in their current government schools even if the students come from different cultural backgrounds.

For the bottom 40%, sending their children to private schools is not an option at all as the cost is far beyond their reach. Nevertheless our respondents see private tuition classes as a more affordable alternative, and many feel that it has now become a necessity to cover the weaknesses in government schools.

Due to an overwhelming belief that the government school system is inadequate, low-income parents view private education, through extra tuition classes, as indispensable. Most respondents agreed that without private education, their children would not gain a required level of comprehension of the school curriculum, and would not be able to keep up with their classroom peers. Of course private schools are beyond their reach. Thus they express their preference for the private system by sending their children to private, fee-paying tuitions, if they can afford it.

Low-income parents opined that private tuition centres provide a better learning experience for their children because the private tutors are more effective. They claim that these private tutors spend more time to help their children, and are more supportive when dealing with weaker students. The parents contrasted this with their experience of teachers in government schools, where teachers will just say “I have written everything on the blackboard, you read and understand or else ask

the other students.” In fact, some of the government school teachers simply “give a lecture and then walk out from the class when the time is finished” and “didn’t care about whether students can absorb or not.”

Furthermore, some cited the small size of tuition classes as an important factor that helps their children learn more effectively. This allows private tutors to give more attention and individual instructions to students. By contrast, classroom sizes in the schools their children attend are bigger, approaching a ratio of one teacher to 40 students.

Even though our respondents portray two different pictures about government schools and private tutors, we feel that it is important to note here that they may well be talking about the same teacher – i.e. the same individual teacher may show one attitude in classroom, but behave differently when conducting his private tuitions. In fact, a few respondents did say that school teachers who conduct private tuition taught better in the tuition as opposed to when they are in school. Our FGDs did not delve deeper into this issue because our purpose at Stage I was only to tease out issues that deserve further investigation.

Nevertheless, despite seeing private tuition as a necessity or at least a good complement to government school, the majority of our respondents are unable to send their children to private tuition because it is not financially viable for them. Private tuition is an aspiration that many are unable to fulfil.

We found that respondents living in urban areas are more likely to use

“You mean those schools that require us to pay hundreds of ringgit per month? Wow...we will die!”

(East Malaysian parent from rural area)

| | Indian – Urban | Malay- Urban | Chinese – Semi Urban | Indian - Rural | Chinese – Rural | Malay Rural | East Malaysians - Rural |
|--|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Private Tuition / Extra Schools | Almost all attend private tuitions | Only if the children are sitting major exams. | Minority take up tuition | Minority | Minority | Can't afford | Can't afford |

Table 2: Take up of private tuition classes

private tuition compared to those in rural areas. The rural-urban gap is quite obvious, but we would need to investigate further to determine whether this is caused purely by inability to pay or if lack of provision in rural areas is a contributing factor.

It is important to note that some respondents who do send their children to private tuition are willing to invest a substantial percentage of their monthly household income to meet the costs. One respondent, a single mother, shared that she spends RM300 per month on tuition expenses alone, despite her household income of just RM600 per month.

3. Attitude towards vocational education

We found quite distinct differentiation between the ethnic groups when it comes to vocational education.

Our Chinese respondents and those in Sabah are most receptive towards vocational education. They are more willing to acknowledge that not all students are inclined towards the academic path. They would prefer to choose vocational education as soon as they detect their children's interest and ability, rather than forcing the children to go through the academic pathway. For them, this would be a better way to ensure a

suitable job opportunity later on in life.

But Malay and Indian parents view vocational schools only as an alternative if children are proven to be incapable academically. They perceive vocational education as the last resort, and a sign of failing in the traditional pathway. As much as possible, they would prefer their children to not go to the vocational stream although they would still give their blessing if their children insist. Some parents also saw vocational qualifications as being of lower value than Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

Having said this, we hasten to add that readers should not make over-generalisations based on ethnicity. Our FGDs were not designed to investigate why this is the case and whether the wider population too is divided in the same pattern. Such investigation is to be done in Stage 2 (and onwards) of the project.

Nevertheless, the perception that the vocational stream is only for those who have failed the academic stream is one that must be looked at carefully. If such an assumption continues, the drive to promote vocational education will be doomed. There is a need to urgently look at the public image of vocational education if this stream is to be promoted to students.

4. Ethnic segregation is real among the poor

When we started this project, we did not plan to investigate how or why parents choose the schools for their children. But as we conducted the focus groups, it became apparent that there is a degree of division between the ethnic groups when it comes to choosing schools. The vast majority of Malay parents who we met send their children to national schools, while almost all the non-Malay parents send their children to vernacular schools.

For many, this is not really a matter of choice but more about practicality. They actually send their children to schools that are closest to home, and it turns out that many of our respondents live in clustered communities dominated by a particular ethnic group, with a corresponding school type serving the community. This automatically leads to segregation between the ethnic groups.

Our respondents complained about the lack of integration and how their children were unable to befriend children from other ethnic groups. But there is not much that they can do about this because that is the reality of the environment they live in.

At this stage, however, we cannot

ascertain whether the segregation is voluntary (i.e. parents intentionally choose the particular school type and would still make the same choice even if there are alternatives) or involuntary (i.e. parents had no alternative but to use the school type accessible by them and may choose differently if they can).

5. Helplessness and inability to move out from an unsupportive system

Low income makes our respondents feel helpless in many circumstances. They cannot afford alternatives, and many cannot even afford supplementary private tuitions for their children even though they are convinced that such tuition will help.

In the current government schools, there are many fees that burden them. They feel compelled to pay these fees despite complaining that their children – many of whom are underperforming in class – are not getting the needed support from the school and teachers.

Many of these parents are passionate about education. Quite a few cried and wept in our discussions as they expressed their feelings to our interviewers. They feel neglected and ignored. None of our respondents know anything about the national consultation to draft the education blueprint and they were not aware that they could participate.

All the respondents were elated to have been invited to our FGDs, eagerly wanting to participate. They are keen to speak up, but they almost never get the opportunity to do so. The schools are not providing them with adequate channels to speak up. Thus many feel resigned to the situation, saying that they cannot

do much to propel their children out of poverty and they just have to make do with whatever they get from the system.

These parents feel powerless. They know that they need a better teaching and learning environment for their children. But they cannot move out from this trap. There is usually no alternative school in the area, and they just simply have to accept the school that their children are allocated to by the District Education Office. Even if there are alternatives, the transportation costs would make it inaccessible for them.

The situation becomes even more problematic for them when they try to play a more active role in the schools. They feel that teachers and school administrators tend to look down on them, and the channels to engage are not always open.

Concluding remarks

Our respondents clearly understand that the quality of education does not equal merely attending school. When given the opportunity, they passionately discuss the rigour, pace and processes of their children's learning experience.

Improving the quality of schools and ensuring that children from low-income families receive quality education are priorities that need to be addressed by the government and other stakeholders. While the National Education Blueprint has attempted to address some of the concerns of low-income families, more attention needs to be channelled towards the specific challenges that face this community, particularly on the obstacles they face in ensuring that their children

“I cry alone when I can't provide what my children need. Why do we suffer so much?”

(Indian parent from rural area)

receive a quality education. But this cannot be done without us actively going down to the ground and talking to the bottom 40%. Otherwise, our policies will continue to suffer from middle-class capture.

If we can raise sufficient funding to continue this project, in the next stages we will examine in greater detail the obstacles faced by the low-income community in education, including language barriers with school authorities, discrimination based on social class, the level of popularity of vocational schools and the transition of low-income children from vernacular schools to government secondary schools.

The team

IDEAS is Malaysia's first think-tank dedicated to promoting market-based solutions to public policy challenges. We were launched on 8 February 2010. On 17 January 2013, we were ranked as the 5th best new think tank in the world (up from 13th in 2011) in a global survey of 6,603 think tanks from 182 countries. As a not-for-profit entity, we are registered as a tax-exempt company limited by guarantee foundation (yayasan) with registration number 940689-WV.

arise Asia Sdn Bhd is a social enterprise founded by like-minded Malaysian individuals who would like to enable and support those who are undertaking social causes. Its core services are programme implementation management and provision of operational services to entities that are primarily focused on delivering solutions to social issues and disparities. Its subject-matter expertise is in talent and education space, both as the engine of growth as well as an enabler to close disparities. arise's founding team is made up of various professionals with a wide variety of experiences including general management, operations, strategic consulting, project management, finance and human resources. Incorporated on 27th February 2012, arise's main objective is to be a strategic enabler for social enterprises, with a catalytic approach in developing the 3rd sector for the Nation.

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