

EXPLORING REMOVE CLASSES IN MALAYSIA

A STUDY TO EVALUATE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

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1.0 Overview

The issue of Remove Class (RC) has always been a reason for concern among teachers, parents and the society at large. RC were started with the purpose of providing students from Vernacular schools which included Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools in the beginning, a platform for improving and enhancing their language and communication skills before they set foot in secondary schools (Akta Pendidikan 1996).

As it exists today, there seem to be a myriad of grouses and dissatisfaction arising from various quarters that are in one way or other involved with the RC. Primarily it stems from the premise that only the students who fare well in languages in the UPSR examinations get promoted to Form 1 and as such only those who are deemed to be weak in languages are retained in the RC. This situation gives rise to several other issues. Firstly, the students who are retained in RC only due to their inability in languages are made to look less capable academically compared to those who were able to go to Form 1 although they may be those who have done well in other subjects such as Science and Mathematics which is also part of the yardstick to measure academic excellence. This ascertains the feelings of dissatisfaction among students and parents.

To a certain extent these children are stigmatized as the "incapable" lot and it may demoralize them severely. Secondly, in cases where the students have actually performed badly in all subjects, they will be subjected to be in the company of similar students who have no interest or motivation to excel academically for the duration of a year. There is then the tendency for these children to collectively divert their attention to activities which intrigue them very much more than formal schooling. These could be related to the social ills that exist in our society today which unfortunately have only been on the rise in the recent past. Students' involvement in such activities either turns them into delinquents or school dropouts. This invariably

contravenes the aspirations of the policy makers with which RC came into picture. Therefore there is a need for an in-depth empirical research on RC. The research seems necessary to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of RC and propose the necessary modifications to be carried out.

2.0 Abstract

This study entitled 'Exploring Remove Classes in Malaysia: A Study to Evaluate Their Effectiveness' explores the effectiveness of Remove Classes (RC) in the Malaysian education system. A mix methodology combining the qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted in this study. The sample for this study is selected RC students, teachers teaching RC, school administrators, parents, politicians, representatives from NGOs, educational organizations and the media. A total of 54 interviews were carried out involving students, teachers, school administrators, politicians, representatives from media, educational organisations and NGOs. Quantitative data was gathered from 548 questionnaires administered to 414 students, 40 teachers and 94 parents. The Cronbach Alpha scores for the sets of questionnaires administered are 0.66, 0.30 and 0.77 for parents, students and teachers respectively. The main findings of this study show that the policy objectives of the RC seemed not achieved due to weaknesses in the implementation of these classes and the lack of focus for important subjects such as Mathematics and Science in the curriculum. Stakeholders have also highlighted their views on abolishing, reviewing or revamping the RC. The findings of the research clearly indicate that there is a necessity to abolish RC as it was found to be not effective in enhancing the literacy level of Bahasa Malaysia among the Tamil school students. The study strongly recommends that the teaching and learning of Bahasa Malaysia at the primary level in Tamil schools should be revised and improved to ensure students acquire basic literacy before leaving the primary school.

3.0 Research Questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

- 3.1 To what extent are the Remove Classes producing desired results?
- 3.2 To what extent are resources facilitating teaching and learning in the Remove Classes?
- 3.3 What are the expectations of various stake-holders on Remove Classes?

4.0 Research Design

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was employed in this study. This mix method approach was adopted to lend strength to the findings of this study. It allowed qualitative data from various sources to be merged to identify emerging trends and patterns in support of the quantitative data. The quantitative and qualitative data analysis was carried out to complement each other.

5.0 Summary of the Findings

This study was undertaken to investigate whether RC in secondary schools are still relevant and should be allowed to continue. While there seem to be data suggesting that those attending these classes are generally happy with the instruction they receive from teachers and that they are benefiting from these classes, on the contrary, numerous issues have been raised concerning the status of these classes and the manner in which these classes are implemented in schools. Even those who agree to have these classes continue have suggested that a comprehensive review of the status, syllabus, textbooks and teachers be undertaken. They are in fact very concerned about the manner in which these classes are organized and conducted in secondary schools. They have also clearly identified the negative effects these classes bring to the students who have been separated from the mainstream and have suggested that these issues be addressed in an objective and professional manner.

As has been analyzed through this study, the RC were compulsory for all students from vernacular schools in the beginning. These classes were introduced to provide the students with an extra year to acquire proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language.

However, there seems to have been various positive modifications made to this rule which have enabled most students to skip these classes and refrain themselves from attending RC. This leaves us with only a handful of students from vernacular schools who attend these classes in secondary schools. These initiatives include allowing students who have scored a minimum grade of C in Bahasa Malaysia in their UPSR examinations to proceed to Form 1. There have also been cases where students who don't score a minimum grade of C are promoted to Form 1 with the approval of school principals, after having sat for specially mounted tests by the schools. Sadly, there seems to be no guidelines provided to school principals thus limiting the number of students who benefit from such initiatives.

On the whole, there seems to be more and more initiatives implemented to reduce the number of students who attend these classes, which have been received well by the stakeholders. The stakeholders, in fact, look forward to reducing the number of students who attend these classes. From the analysis of the data collected for this study, it was found that there are numerous situations where students who have scored grades As and Bs for all other subjects, but failed to get a minimum grade C for Bahasa Malaysia have been subjected to attending RCs. The questions, however, are why were these students able to score good grades in other subjects but not in the Bahasa Malaysia paper, and why are they required to attend RC when they have actually scored good grades in other subjects but failed to score a minimum grade of C only in Bahasa Malaysia, when this is not the case for students from national schools where every student is promoted to Form 1 without taking into consideration their grades in UPSR.

Findings of this study suggest that many students involved in the research desire to skip RC as they prefer to be with their primary school classmates and

avoid the one year delay. In relation to this, about two-thirds of the teachers teaching RC suggest that these RC students need to be promoted to Form 1 latest after their mid-term examination. Since the students who go to RC are from vernacular schools, in most cases, the students are from one single race. For one year, they are separated from the main-stream and are required to interact among themselves. The irony is that, they are required to acquire proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language but end up not having the discourse to use these languages, but instead using their mother-tongue in most cases.

In this context, teachers' experience charts a lack of racial integration among the RC students. The use of the Bahasa Malaysia, as a language for communication, seems minimal and in dire need of serious consideration. Another serious issue raised by various stakeholders as their concern is the self-concept and motivation level of these students who attend the RC. They are unhappy about the situation where these students are 'removed' from the main-stream and are put in a very different and 'de-motivating' environment. While most of their peers are in Form 1, they are 'removed' and put together with 'under-achieving' students. It seems inevitable that students who attend these classes feel segregated and discriminated. According to the responses from stakeholders most teachers who teach these classes lack motivation and interest.

While RC are there to cater for students from vernacular schools who have failed to acquire the required proficiency in these two subjects, the question often being raised is whether teachers who teach these classes are adequately trained. For example, are the teachers prepared to teach Bahasa Malaysia as a second language to Indian and Chinese students. In this context, where teaching and learning is concerned stakeholders have taken almost a unanimous stand to say that they wanted teachers who are teaching Bahasa Malaysia in Remove Classes to be those who can converse in students' mother tongue.

Another question which has been raised is if teachers teaching RC are trained to teach these students who need to be provided with special attention and guidance

in specific areas. That does not seem to be the case. It would be rather impossible for these students who are considered as under-achievers to be given special attention by teachers who have not been trained to provide the special attention and guidance. Even if teachers are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills, how could this happen if the number of students in these classes resemble the numbers in the normal classes? How could one expect significant changes to take place when the necessary measures have not been put in place?

There were also serious concerns raised by various stakeholders who are very concerned about the content of the syllabus being used in RC. Although the curriculum seem to suggest that Mathematics and Science have been incorporated into the language syllabi, the absence of these two key subjects being taught explicitly for a year raises serious concerns. The general perceptions of stakeholders such as media representatives and politicians collected and analyzed in this study calls for a review and revamp of the syllabus to, among others, include all core subjects. There have been also calls for the textbooks being used to be reviewed as these textbooks need to be more contemporary and need to have more consolidative and reinforcement exercises/activities.

6.0 Recommendations

The research team would like to make the following recommendations based on the data collected, analyzed and interpreted for the purpose of this study.

6.1 Phasing out Remove Classes

The RC need to be phased out in stages starting January 2013 and are completely abolished by December 2015. The students need to be allowed to proceed to Form 1. They need to be allowed to be in the main-stream and are provided with the equal opportunities as their peers for interaction and learning. These students who fail to acquire basic proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language, even after having been in special classes, need to be spread over the many Form 1 classes where they will be provided with the opportunities to interact and learn from their peers

who are either average or good students. More importantly, this will allow them to be in multicultural and multilingual discourses where they will be able to pick up linguistic and other communicative skills.

The following initiatives are recommended together with the main recommendation stated above as to provide a total-approach in phasing out the RC.

6.2 Intervention Programs

There have to be initiatives put in place to ensure that students who fail to acquire basic proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language are identified at a very early stage. They must be identified by the end of Year 3 in their primary schools. One should not wait till they complete their primary education to realize that they lack basic proficiency in these languages and make them the victims of the system. This is especially so when about 40 per cent of the students who complete six years of education in Tamil Schools fail to obtain a minimum grade of C in Bahasa Malaysia. If their deficiencies are identified early, intervention programmes could be introduced sooner to ensure that those who fail to acquire basic proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia after six years of education are reduced to less than 5 per cent.

6.3 Class size

The student numbers of each class under the intervention programmes where these students are placed need to be less than 25. This will allow the time and space for teachers to pay special attention to these students to bring significant changes in them.

6.4 Teacher Education

Teachers who teach these students in classes under the intervention programmes need to be trained adequately to address the special needs of these students. Teachers need to be given specially mounted professional development courses. These students need to be given special attention and guidance. Furthermore these students, who in

most cases are non-native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia and English Language, need to be taught using the appropriate strategies to enable them to acquire these language skills. The appropriate approaches include the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia using second-language approach.

7.0 Conclusion

This study to evaluate the effectiveness of RC in Malaysia is the first major initiative to investigate in-depth this issue and make the appropriate recommendations. This issue has been the serious concern of many stakeholders for a long time. There is over-whelming support from the data to phase out these RC in stages for the long-term benefit of the students. It is the hope of the research team that these recommendations are taken seriously by the relevant authorities and the necessary changes are done accordingly. The research team is of the opinion that this is also the appropriate time to make the necessary changes to the existing system given the fact that the country is witnessing the benefits of Government Transformation Programme including in the field of education.

