

## Decent pay for teachers key to quality education

Tuesday, 01 May 2007

Jakarta (The Jakarta Post: (01/05/07) This year's National Education Day on May 2 should serve as a momentum to improve the fate of teachers, the people who play a pivotal role in education, if we really believe education is a vehicle toward advancement. The need to improve the welfare of teachers and lecturers, who have been neglected for a long time, is urgent for two reasons. First, they serve as the engine for the creation of the skilled and educated human resources that a nation needs to be on par with other countries, but they are among the lowest paid groups in society.

Forget the 2030 vision of turning Indonesia into the world's fifth largest economy if there is no improvement in education and the welfare of the more than 3 million teachers in Indonesia. The experiences of Japan, South Korea and Singapore prove the development of economy is intertwined with the advancement of education. The salaries of teachers and lecturers in Indonesia are among the lowest in ASEAN. A professor at a state university, for example, receives just Rp 2.7 million (US\$300) per month or one fourteenth of his or her colleagues in Malaysia, while the salaries of teachers at primary and secondary schools are even lower.

This marginalized group not only earns insultingly low salaries, but is often made a scapegoat for poor quality education and social ills like deteriorating morality, student brawls, juvenile delinquency and drug addiction. Both the government and the people show little respect to educators as if their meager salaries are a reality that they have to accept. Indeed there are many good teachers and lecturers in the country. Many of these people chose the job not for economic reasons, but out of a motivation to share with other people.

By chance or by design there have been a few positive spots in education news in the past few years. Some rich regencies like Kutai Kertanegara in East Kalimantan and Jakarta, thanks to the implementation of regional autonomy, have raised teachers' pay. Kutai has even provided teachers with motorcycles and low interest loans to buy houses. The impact of better rewards is positive. Reports of absences at most schools have dropped and teachers are more committed to their jobs, partly out of fear of losing them. On the flipside it is now easier for principals to enforce discipline. Of course raising teaching salaries is not the only step to improving education quality. Teachers need better training and education and school buildings. The management of schools at all levels of education -- the schools, subdistrict and district education offices -- needs revamping and the curriculum needs reviewing.

The phenomenal performance of junior and senior high schools in Javanese regencies at the national exam is another encouraging sign. The recent report by Kompas proves the pivotal role of teachers. The report attributed the achievement of these regional schools to a synergy of highly motivated of students wanting to succeed and the unflinching commitment of teaching staff to their jobs. The educators, be they primary or secondary school teachers or lecturers, are the people who determine the quality of an education at an institution. The top universities in the world are willing to spend a lot of money to recruit qualified academics.

Indonesia does not have to "import" teachers or lecturers as we have many qualified educators in stock. What the government and policy makers must do is to have the political will to improve education. What is a reasonable salary for a teacher? Rector of the Bandung-based Indonesian Education University Prof. Mohammad Fakry Gaffar once suggested that the most appropriate salary for Indonesian teachers and lecturers is one set at Rp 4 million and Rp 7 million per month respectively.

Why do the salaries of teachers and lecturers need raising? More teachers and good lecturers will take outside jobs depending on their qualifications in order to make their own ends meet. For instance academics who graduated from top universities abroad will seek jobs at private and government institutions as consultants, advisors, expert staff and director generals. The others may seek high paying employment overseas as lecturers or researchers.

Some of these moonlighters only aim to make ends meet, not to enrich themselves as finely illustrated by the experience of one of my colleagues who received a research job at a foreign-funded institution in Jakarta. The reason is simple. "The Rp 1.5 million take home pay I receive from teaching job is simply not enough for me to support my family," my colleague said, adding that at the new place he earned more than five times of his salary at the Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB), where he has taught for almost 10 years.

If this trend continues, the losers are the students due to high absence rate of teachers or lecturers. It must noted that the key of a lecture is a meeting between the students and the lecturers regardless of the medium used in teaching. Teaching is a high calling but is still attractive to university graduates, especially females. Some, including those from top institution like IPB, are now taking Diploma IV programs as one of the requirements to teach. This is a positive phenomenon. Seize it if the government is serious to promote education. Education is expensive and it is nonsense to talk about quality education as long as the welfare of educators is appalling.

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