

MediaTitle	The Heat	Language	English
Date	19 Oct 2013	Readership	60,000
Circulation	20,000	Color	Full Color
Section	NEWS	ArticleSize	1261 cm ²
Page No	1,26,28	PR Value	RM 64,125
AdValue	RM 21,375		



High achievers help low performers

Can the Teach For Malaysia initiative spark profound change in our education system?

... p26&28



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Sparking a change

Three years ago, Dzameer Dzulkipli founded Teach For Malaysia out of a desire to improve Malaysia's state of education and a passion for developing local talent. Today he faces the challenges of growing the organisation and addressing the criticism levelled against it

WHETHER it is the flip-flopping of the medium of instruction in national schools or the debatable quality of teachers, the state of education in Malaysia is a hot button issue at every mealtime conversation.

It was no different for colleagues Dzameer Dzulkipli and Keeran Sivarajah, who were discussing how to improve education in Malaysia during a mamak session in 2009. However, unlike others who merely air their dissatisfaction, they decided to act upon it.

Inspired by social initiatives Teach For Australia and Teach First in the UK, Dzameer and Keeran launched Teach For Malaysia in 2010. The non-profit social enterprise is aimed at enlisting high achieving young professionals and Malaysian graduates as Fellows to teach at low-performing secondary schools.

"We believe that high quality individuals should be teachers. I know that if we work on helping the students who need it the most, we will raise the quality of Malaysian talent simultaneously - there will be a multiplier effect," says Dzameer.

TFM is the first chapter in Southeast Asia and one of the 27 partners of the Teach For All global education network, which helps social enterprises globally replicate the Teach For America model to end education inequality.

From Fellows to leaders

The decision to start TFM is not 100% altruistic, says Dzameer, who admits that he also took the plunge to start his own business partly because he felt unfulfilled in his consultant job at PwC. "My dad is an accountant and economist and he had an infectious enthusiasm about his

work. My brother loved animals and was always clear about who he was. I felt like something was missing," says the 29-year-old.

He soon discovered talent development to be his passion. He says TFM's two-year teaching fellowship acts as a leadership development programme, where Fellows can exercise their leadership and creativity in teaching students under challenging circumstances. (See sidebar for more on Fellows' experiences)

The idea of teaching students in underperforming schools may seem romantic to many, but in reality, it often takes graduates at least six months or more to acclimatise to their teaching environment and familiarise with the syllabus.

Those who can't take the pressure end up throwing in the towel - around 1% to 2% of Fellows drop out of the fellowship because of wrong job fit.

Dzameer says it is precisely these challenges of teaching in a high-need school that forces Fellows to grow from a leadership development aspect, because "leaders are not developed by having it easy".

Facing the brickbats

Dzameer says TFM's first two years of operations was focused on demonstrating the Fellowship's potential to positively impact students.

He believes TFM's biggest impact on students is "access" - creating opportunities for them to be exposed to role models and experiences beyond their communities to further inspire them in their pursuit of education

One way TFM creates "access" for students is via "TFM Week", an annual event where industry leaders are invited to teach alongside Fellows in the classroom for a day. Among those who have participated in "TFM Week" include Datuk Jimmy Choo, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, AirAsia CEO Aireen Omar, Datuk Seri Idris Jala, GE Aviation managing director Suresh Shanmugam and actress Aishah Sinclair.

A spin-off initiative, "TFM Week: Flipped" was launched this year, involving field trips to workplaces and educational facilities. Recent field trip destinations include Google Malaysia's office, Bernama's office, Kidzania, Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia.

When asked how TFM Fellows are more effective at teaching compared with formally trained teachers, Dzameer says participants undergo a two-month intensive course designed by Institut Aminuddin Baki and Universiti Utara Malaysia. For practical training, Fellows have to start off with classroom teaching for four weeks at a holiday learning camp.

Fellows also have the benefits of mentors to turn to, such as their leadership development officers - who mostly comprise former teachers - and school-based mentors throughout the two years.

Dzameer believes that TFM Fellows make great teachers because they have the benefit of inexperience. "There is a sense of possibility and hope among

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Teachers should be competitive

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them and they tend to challenge the status quo, which is refreshing in a system that is rigid. They learn how to navigate around things. Likewise in any organisation, there is always a maverick," he says.

While TFM Fellows compete with new teachers for allocated teaching positions, existing teachers are not at risk of losing their jobs to Fellows because civil servants are not easily dismissed, he says.

"If you want to be a teacher, you have to make it competitive. A performance-based assessment and exit should be introduced – which I believe will be looked into in the new blueprint. The challenge will be in implementing the blueprint," he says, adding that there should be greater autonomy and accountability for schools.

Shifting gears

Over the past three years, recruitment numbers for Fellows have been encouraging, as there has been a steady increase despite a tightening of the selection criteria, he says. This year's 2012/2013 cohort has 72 Fellows, a 33% increase from last year's batch of 54. TFM's inaugural 2010/2011 batch comprised 50 Fellows.

Being funded by both the Ministry of Education and private sector is critical in ensuring there is government support and collaborating with corporations allows TFM to attract talent.

TFM also collaborates with corporations such as CIMB and PwC for joint-employment programmes whereby fresh graduates commit to the TFM Fellowship for two years before they are hired by the

companies.

Recognition by the private sector is important to nullify the excuse that taking two years off to teach for TFM will jeopardise one's career plans, he says.

Asked about individuals who sign up to teach only to boost their CV, Dzameer says the recruitment team usually detects such individuals at the selection stage. However, he qualifies that not everyone who teaches for TFM is solely passionate about teaching but Fellows usually have a mix of teaching aspirations and personal development goals.

Moving forward, the emphasis will shift towards ensuring the organisation itself is sustainable in the long run through means of recruitment and funding. "Join-

ing the social sector is not sexy so we have to think how to change this mindset. For the first two levels of employment of about four years' experience, our pay is very competitive but we have to improve the remuneration for the more senior roles," he says, adding that there also needs to be a clear career progression for employees.

The management is also looking into improving organisational effectiveness, with efforts to build up its alumni network so that ex-Fellows can continue to improve education in any field they are working in. For instance, TFM is currently collaborating with alumni working in Boston Consulting Group and Google.

Ultimately, the challenge for TFM is to change the mindsets of the public who are sceptical and pessimistic towards the education sector.

"It's very much like the perception towards joining the civil service – there is a huge pessimism that needs to be fixed. We try to change that. When you step into the classroom to make a difference in the kid's life, it's just you and the kid – there's no room for the 'culture is bad' excuse to fail your kids," he says. ■

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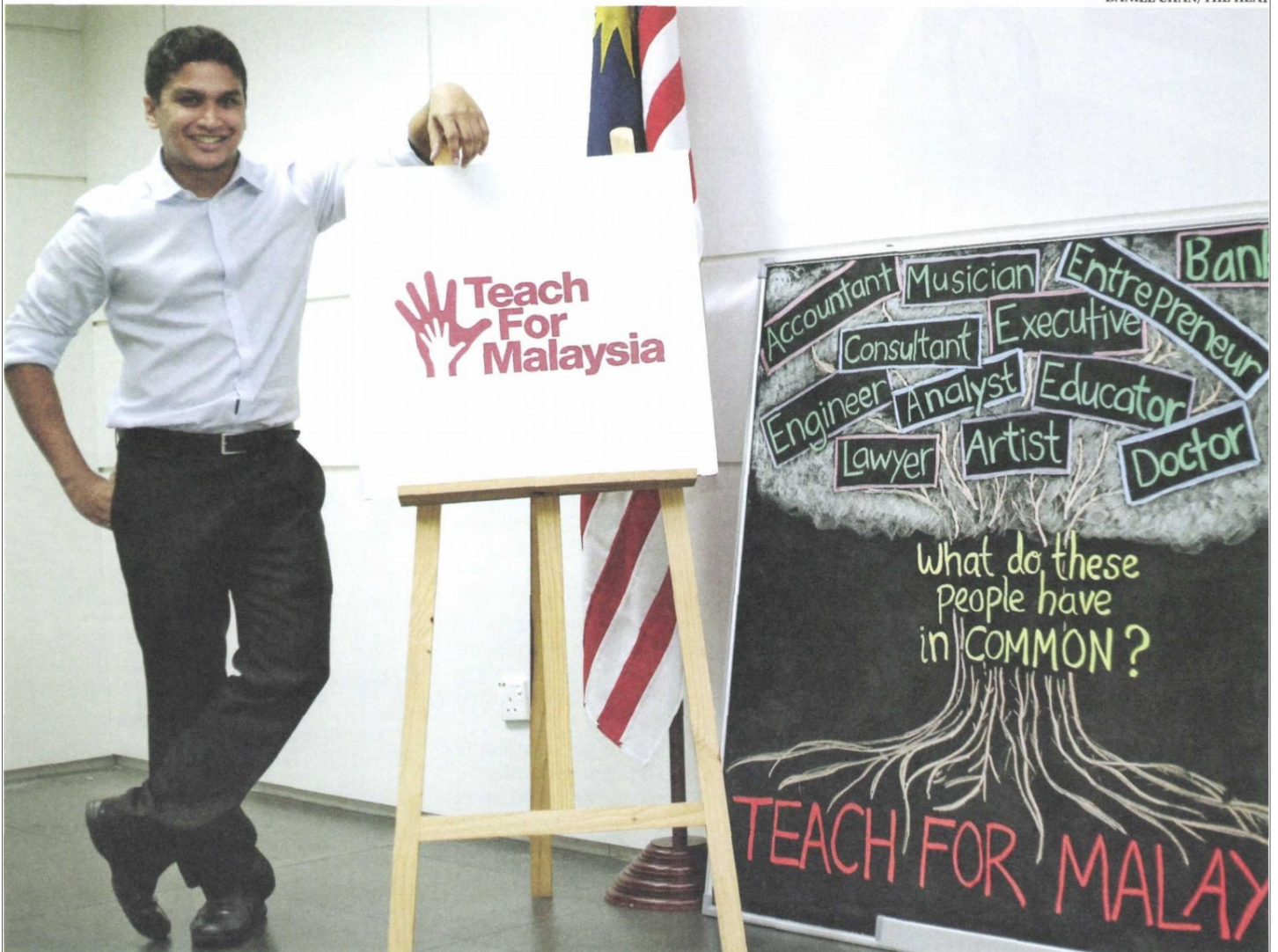
BY KATHLEEN TAN



Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir was one of the guest teachers during TFM Week

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DANIEL CHAN/THE HEAT



Dzameer Dzulkifli says challenging circumstances force Fellows to grow into leaders

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Internationally-renown shoe designer Datuk Jimmy Choo takes a hands-on approach while teaching students during theTFM Week