

Raising standards in national schools

The Sun - 29/3/2007

Our education system has gone through several changes in a bid to craft a truly national one that is acceptable to all and yet meet the challenges of a globalised world. From the pre-independence Barnes, Fenn-Wu and Razak reports to the post-independence Rahman Talib report and many that came afterwards, we have been readjusting the formula that drives education. The Education Ministry recently launched the National Education Blueprint in response to public complaints and also the government's own study and observation over the years, UiTM pro-chancellor and former education ministry director-general Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad tells **ZAINON AHMAD and HUSNA YUSOP.**

theSun: The Education Ministry has come up with a blueprint called Education Development Master Plan. A sort of comprehensive plan to improve the existing education system. What do you think of it?

It is good. It is, of course, based on a very thorough study - a very commendable study indeed. It is in response to a lot of public complaints. It is also made as a result of the education ministry's own study and observation over the years. Having said that, implementing this blueprint requires a lot of effort.

You must have noticed that the objectives are many and wide-ranging. Achievable?

Yes, very all-encompassing which is very, very good. And I think it has got very long-term objectives as well. The ministry itself cannot achieve everything. Not within the five years of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, at least. Implementation has to go on even beyond the five years. There were other plans before. Some of the things are still dangling ... have not been quite solved. So not all (objectives) may be achieved. Therefore, I have a feeling (that) perhaps we should identify what are the areas that need to be given priority.

Why difficult to achieve?

The reason why it may be difficult to achieve, first of all, is we

are short of manpower, we need manpower. Not numbers but quality manpower. I believe education, whatever the policy is, its final success will be measured by what is achieved on the ground. Do the products we produce answer the manpower needs of the country? In attempting to fulfill this, there must be greater coordination with other ministries and government agencies. The education ministry should not be left alone. Anyway, first of all, we need people.

What kind of people?

First, we need teachers. Plenty of good

teachers. In education they are the frontliners. If they do not do well, if they cannot perform well, whatever your plans are, they cannot be achieved. Now, do we have the right set of teachers?

But do we also have the right set of people at the administration level to make sure they understand and have a commitment to make the plan work. They must be committed people. For example, in the case of teachers, do they do their work because they are teachers or because they are earning a living? Do the people - the lecturers and administrators - in universities understand and will do things required of them or required by their commitment to make the whole national education system work?

You may say, well, they may not achieve all but will achieve parts of it. Is that good enough? But if they achieve part of it, where do we go from there? My contention is that given the constraints, let us try to understand what (objectives) are more demanding today and attend to them first. If we don't and allow things to go on as before, we might jeopardise the fate of the nation.

Because for the first time, our government under Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is emphasising human capital. Human capital means the success of achieving plans. Do you want the success to be thin but covering all or do you want it

to be concentrated in certain areas for the time being? That is the choice you want to make. Whatever areas you want to concentrate (on) first, you must make sure you have the right staffing.

OK, let's look at the objectives laid out in the plan. One of them is to *memperkasakan sekolah kebangsaan* - strengthening the national schools. I think you will agree that it is a priority.

It is not a new priority. It has always been the priority since day one. It has been on the pedestal for a long time already. Anyway, it is a good thing it is being re-prioritised. Now, what do we do?

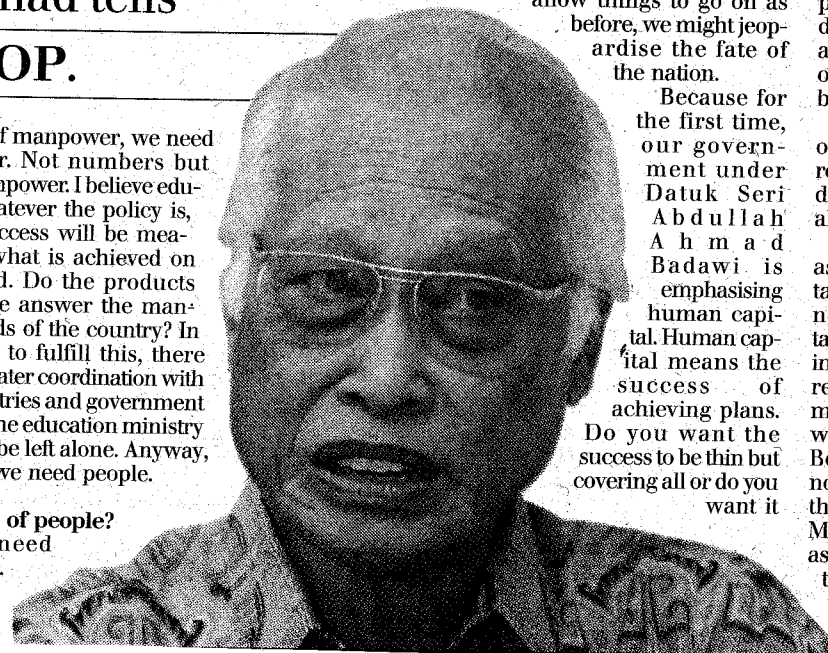
There have been a lot of comments about what we should do. For instance, a suggestion of what national school should do to make it more attractive to the Chinese, Indians and others is to teach Chinese and Tamil.

To me, *sekolah kebangsaan*, primarily, has nothing to do with the teaching of Chinese or Tamil. Also, it must be emphasised that we are improving, or strengthening, the national schools not because we want to please the Chinese, the Indians, the Ibans or whoever, but because it is the right thing to do.

We have to raise the standard of *sekolah kebangsaan* because it is the national school, the number one school type in the land. How do you do this? First and foremost, you need to fill national schools with the best teachers. Next, the schools must have good infrastructure, good environment and equipped with the best physical facilities. Now, once standards are achieved, standards are raised and indicated by results of public examinations, you can be sure everyone will flock to it.

People who have been moving out of national schools will return because of the high standard of education that the national schools provide.

So OK, Chinese is also taught as a language. It should not be taught to attract the Chinese to national schools. It should be taught because Chinese is now an important language of not just this region but the world. Everyone must learn Chinese. What's wrong with Malays learning Chinese? Because China is now an economic power. If you want to go to the business world, I think the Malays must try to learn Chinese as well. So it is nothing to do with the Chinese community. It is to



make the school more equipped to play a role in the future.

So Chinese parents are taking their children out of national schools and putting them in Chinese schools because the standards there are higher? And that if the standards of national schools are raised they will come back to them. So it is really standards?

Absolutely. I tell you why. If you look at Singapore, it doesn't have Chinese schools any more. Also, no Tamil schools. But they teach Tamil and Chinese as subjects and the Chinese throughout accept it. It means the Chinese are not going for Chinese schools. They go for standards and possibly their language. So if they teach their language, they teach it well, at the right standard.

How do we have the right standards?

Some national schools have very high standards already. You look at standards at the Bukit Bintang Girls' School, Convent Bukit Nanas, Victoria Institution. Very high standards. Now look at what happens in schools in Kuala Selangor, for instance. Because the majority of *sekolah kebangsaan* are in rural areas. Now we are talking about *sekolah bestari* or smart schools and all this. Good.

But remember, there is always a gap between rural and urban. In the past we talk about (the) possible four gaps. One is economic gap - poor people in the village. Then you talk about knowledge gap - people living in town, engineers, doctors, while in the kampung they are just rubber tappers, fishermen. Then you talk about the third possibility - physical infrastructure. Schools in the kampung, they don't have proper labs, buildings ... but in the towns they are all taken care of.

Then you talk about parental background. Parents are more educated therefore they are able to give knowledge or whatever ... Those were the days. But now there is another gap. The digital gap. Because people in town have computers, in the village, sometimes they don't even have electricity. Now let's solve this.

But to solve this you require money and money must come from the Treasury because the ministry of education does not have the money. So, in other words, you must have teachers.

Teachers have to be appointed and approved by the Public Service Department. Therefore, there must be a concerted effort by the ministries concerned to look at how to improve. So, in other words, whatever blueprints education does, to make sure it is successful, they have to be supported by other agencies as well.

So there must be a concerted and coordinated effort? Right.

They talked about *Memartabatkan Profesion Guru*. Is there something wrong with the profession? What has happened to our teachers? Why are there not many non-Malays among them?

The question to ask is, those who become teachers, do they really want to be a teacher? I was ADO (assistant district officer), (then) I became a teacher. I think in the history (of our nation), nobody does it this way. I am the only one who became ADO, who (then) became a teacher. There are teachers who become ADO. But in my case, I am the only one (who did it the other way). Why? Because I chose education. I am worried that teachers may choose teaching because they may not be able to get other jobs. So, are we getting the right people to become teachers. That is one.

Secondly, during my time perhaps, there was no such thing as New Economic Policy. So the Malays have to come join the service because you cannot join the business world because there was no business. Now the country's economy is booming. So, where do you get more money? Becoming a teacher or (work) in the private sector? So why do I choose to be a teacher? So your question is answered. Why don't they join? Is there any point in joining? And if I join, I may get sent to Kuala Selangor or some place else, life would be difficult. So that's what it is. It is a choice, actually. A balance of choice.

Maybe the teachers are not paid well enough?

In 1996, I produced a report. I was asked by the minister, Datuk Seri Najib (Abdul Razak), because the teachers were sending a memorandum and they wanted to demonstrate. A committee was set up and I was the chairman. We produced a report, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

It covered four areas. First of

all, talking about opportunities in employment for teachers. Second, about loans for teachers. Third, about incentives. Fourth, about welfare and such things. We made some recommendations. But unfortunately, when the report came out, the economy was down. So they did not implement it. But they are now implementing a good number of them.

But unfortunately, the report was not published ... but again as I was saying if you increase the salary by RM10, if the ministry is about 100-strong, then you are talking about RM1,000. But if the ministry is 1,000-strong, you are talking about RM10,000. The education ministry is the one with the most manpower. So, because it is big, a lot of money is needed. So, sometimes, I suspect that (they) cannot afford to spend that amount of money. So, teachers' fate always lies on this balance.

So, you are on the side of the teachers?

No. I am not on their side but I think if you compare the teaching profession with others, where are they going? Nowhere. That report is worth looking into.

But you think they are much better paid now?

They are much better paid now. Based on that report, some of the recommendations have been implemented. The only thing is, I would want to say this, you must choose teachers properly.

People who want to be teachers and with good qualifications?

Yes. The interview for selection must be thorough.

They have this in the blueprint.

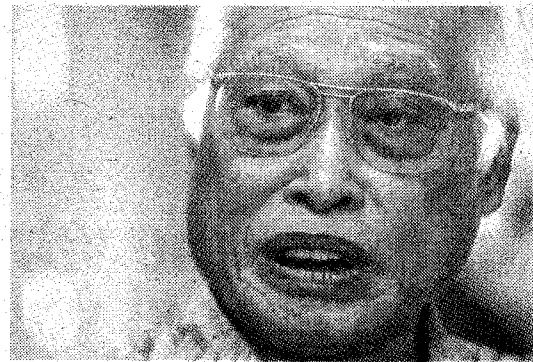
Yes. But it was in the 1996 report too.

What happened to that report?

They could not implement it because the cost was so high. But, slowly they implemented it one (recommendation) by one but the report was not released. But I got a copy of the report. The teachers' union was demanding for it to be implemented because they have no money. But the politicians implemented it one by one. And a good number of the recommendations are in the new plan.

For example, we recommended there should be graduate teachers for primary schools, it is done now.

Don't you think headmasters should be more autonomous



First and foremost, you need to fill national schools with the best teachers. Next, the schools must have good infrastructure, good environment and equipped with the best physical facilities. Now, once standards are achieved, standards are raised and indicated by results of public examinations, you can be sure everyone will flock to it.

instead of always acting on instructions from the ministry?

It depends. When you give responsibility to someone, you ask this question. Can he carry out the responsibilities or not? If he is knowledgeable, if he is able, then you can say okay, I give you full trust, you go ahead. But there are people who cannot do that, who must be told how to spell A, how to spell B, then you have a problem. But I think the headmasters are better educated than they were before. In the pre-war years, headmasters came out of Sultan Idris Teaching College, Standard Six qualification. Now they got SPM, they got graduates and all. I think some measure of autonomy must be provided because otherwise you would make headmasters very stereotype, waiting for instructions and they don't think that much. And for examinations, can the teachers or headmasters not arrange their own management or evaluation, with the ministry giving guidelines? But then, this must be followed by one thing. We have for example today, the complaint that at secondary school, students do not know how to read and write. Now, teaching them how to read and write should be at the primary, no longer at the secondary. If it is at secondary, that means...

The primary has failed?

Has failed. I think you got it, very strong words. That's why I didn't use it. (Laughs) The primary has failed. Therefore, there must be a sort of teacher training at the primary level to make sure that by the time they reach secondary level they are able to read, write and calculate. Children in towns, they go to Standard One, they have been in kindergarten for two years. They become very confident. The Malay school in the kampung, they go to Standard One, they cry, because it is the first time they go to school. When they cannot follow the lesson, they get bored.

When they get bored, they could drop out. And this is happening in the villages.

But they have Kemas kindergarten.

I ask you this question. Who are the teachers in Kemas?

You mean, are they trained teachers?

Do they know their job? What is their qualification? Just Form Five, Form Three. You expect them to train? How long is their training? People in schools having been trained in teachers' training colleges for two, three years, find it difficult, you trained for three or four months, can you do it?

But shouldn't the education minister look into this (kindergarten)?

They should. They should be given attention. Because people in town start kindergarten at the age of four. Those in the kampung start at five or six. How can you compete?

So the key is the teachers.

Yes. Prepare them first. Like your teaching of Maths and Science. You don't prepare the teachers first and then teach.

That is why there is a problem now. You don't have enough teachers, right?

Yes, there is a problem now. You have them teaching Maths and Science but can they speak English?

So, everything is ad hoc?

Well... that's ...

Okay, you don't want to say it. Do you think this blueprint has responded sufficiently to why it was created in the first place?

I find the suggestions in it are all very relevant. My question is, in order to achieve a target, there must be an efficient delivery system. Delivery system depends from bottom to top, from top to bottom. The top means the capability of the ministry to implement it must be there. Then do we have enough people to train the teachers? Secondly, this has got to be supervised. People at the state level and district level, can they supervise efficiently? Thirdly, can the headmasters give proper guidance to the teachers? Lastly, are the teachers trained and committed to deliver?

For the full interview, visit sun2suarf.com

PERDANA
SHIP
TION
SAN
KAPIMPINAN
PERDANA