

learning curve

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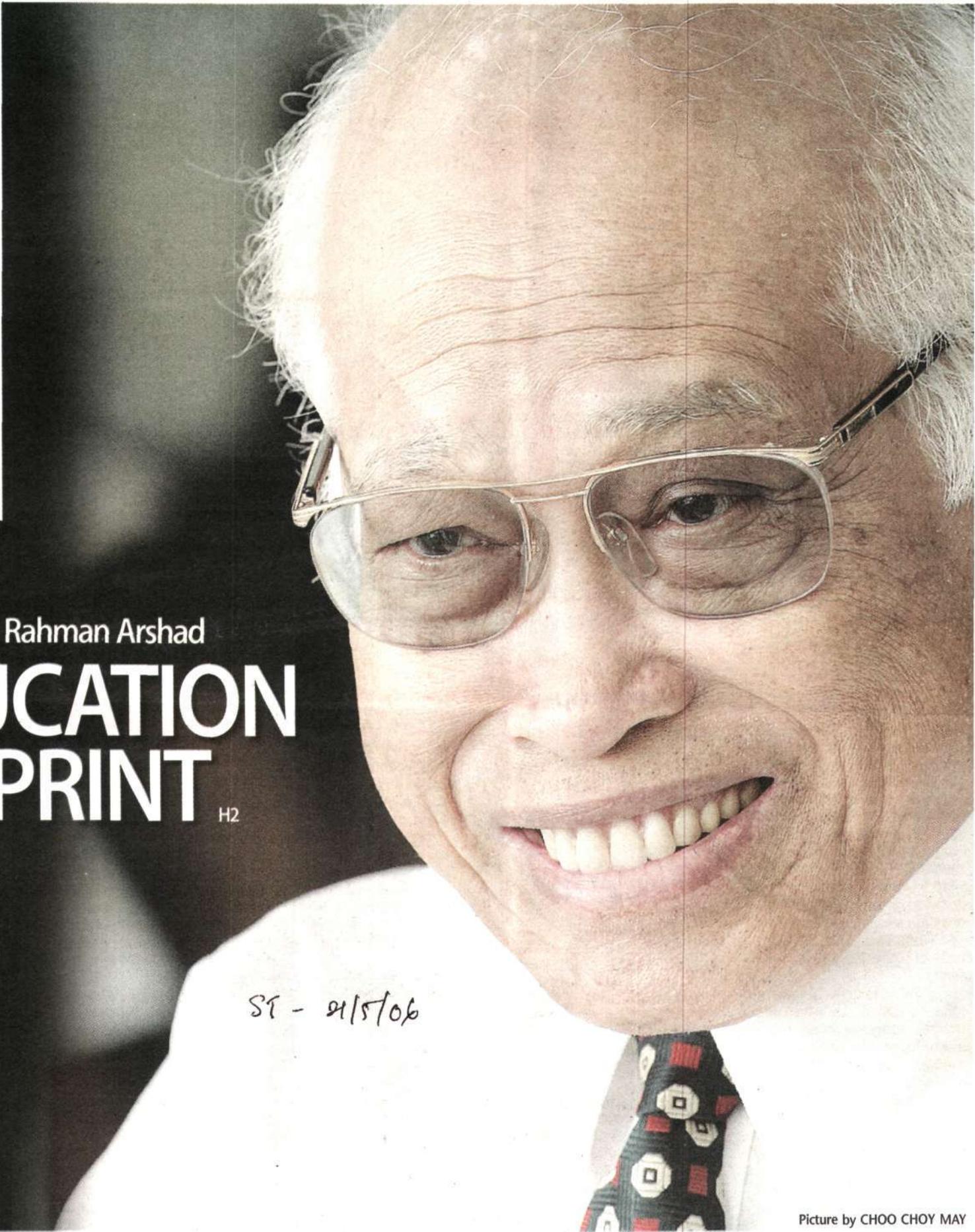


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ST - 21/5/06

Picture by CHOO CHOY MAY

Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad

HIS EDUCATION BLUEPRINT H2



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education supplement



MY SCHOOL DAYS
'I was more
of an athlete'



ENGLISH SKILLS
'Grammarman'

A CONVERSATION WITH ...

Charting the future of education

The charismatic Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad, a former education director-general (1985-1991), talks incisively about the path education in this country must take, its far-reaching implications on Malaysia's well-being and the important role schools play in this plan.

SUMITHA MARTIN writes.

It has been 15 years since Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad retired as education director-general but he still has his finger on the pulse of things.

In an interview with *Learning Curve*, he launches into a step-by-step account of how education should be charted for the country and how schools figure prominently in the entire scheme of things.

The educationist says schools — the primary stage of learning — represent the core catalyst of change in any education blueprint; be it the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) which has set aside a RM40.3 billion allocation for education or the latest higher education review which aspires to make Malaysia an international centre of higher education, among others.

Here's why: In order to make higher education in Malaysia an attractive option for foreigners, "we have to make sure our education foundation (primary and secondary) is strong".

In other words, says the University College Sedaya International chancellor, the ideal manner of attracting outsiders is "by educating our own masses".

And the way to begin, is "by getting our primary education right".

To do so, the most crucial problem which policy makers must attend to immediately is the urban-rural divide in terms of physical infrastructure and teacher development.

Rural states such as Kelantan and Terengganu, and East Malaysia, he says, still lag behind because the legacy of the British administration — during which Straits Settlements,



Schools play a pivotal role in any education blueprint.

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Abdul Rahman. — Picture by CHOO CHOY MAY.

for example, Penang and Malacca, as well as the administrative centre of Kuala Lumpur were given priority and rural states overlooked — has not been addressed.

The provision of proper buildings, water and electricity will help give rural schools that much-needed "level playing field".

A related rural problem is teacher education and development: The situation where teachers only see a newspaper "once a month" must be rectified, while teachers' learning resources should be abundant, if teachers are to be "facilitators in the acquisition of knowledge".

Modern-day teachers, Abdul Rahman stresses, can no longer be

reservoirs of knowledge in the mould of their predecessors because of the information age in which individuals, children in particular, absorb knowledge in leaps and bounds.

Hence, the need for a "new orientation of the mind" among teachers — and how, the educationist questions, can rural teachers take part in this if learning resources are scarce?

An equally crucial need is teachers of top quality.

Here, Abdul Rahman, who was once a teacher himself at Malay College Kuala Kangsar from 1962 to 1964, advocates the radical reform that the teaching profession should be recognised as a separate profession and more crucially, of a higher standing than all others.

And how does one do that?

"By selecting only the best and paying them well".

Most importantly, he stresses, "Make it so difficult yet attractive for one to enter the profession."

His logic for placing the teaching profession above all others is simple. "How can the mediocre (teachers) produce the best (students)?"

Moreover, he points out, human capital is the most important commodity a country can possess and countries which lack natural resources have wisely recognised this fact.

Such countries, he notes, have invested enormously in attracting

highly qualified candidates to join their teaching workforce which is responsible for nurturing their human capital.

Abdul Rahman strongly believes that it is also the teaching profession which plays an important role in Malaysia's bid to ride the wave of globalisation.

"It's not enough to be a *kampung* or indeed, even a regional champion. One needs to be a champion on the world stage."

Therefore, what does Malaysia need?

"Inventive minds", and the best way to produce them is "the way we teach in schools — to produce thinking and creative Malaysians".

A related issue here is Abdul Rahman's long-standing concern — that primary school pupils who have not achieved basic reading and writing competencies, should not be allowed automatic entry into secondary school. They should instead be retained until they acquire the necessary abilities.

For, "what is the use of 'graduating' from secondary school but in reality, being a mental drop-out"?

Another pivotal factor that figures in the globalisation challenge is the command of English possessed by Malaysians. Abdul Rahman advocates "not so much improving a student's command of English through learning Maths and Science in English but learning English as a

second language and then applying the proficiency gained to understand any other subject including Maths and Science".

In this regard, he strongly supports the re-hiring of retired English teachers and the employment of native speakers.

In fact, this need is so urgent, that he lauds the move by some rural states such as Terengganu which have welcomed native speakers from the United States to assist local English Language teachers in the classroom.

Terengganu is the first state in Malaysia to be part of the English Teaching Assistants Fulbright Fellowship programme, where 10 young participants from America are assigned to different secondary schools for five months to promote English.

Although no teaching or language credentials are required, English Teaching Assistants go through an intense period of cultural immersion in their schools and homestays. (*Learning Curve*, Jan 8).

On the whole, Abdul Rahman readily admits that having been down the road before, Malaysia's education challenges are tough and constant policy pronouncements are easier made than delivered.

"But we must have a goal to aspire to."

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