

Printing Instructions: Select **File** and then **Print** from your browser's menu

--- Article Information ---

This article was printed from [Sun2Surf](#)

Article's URL: <http://www.thesundaily.com/article.cfm?id=17455>

Raising standards in national schools

By: Zainon Ahmad and Husna Yusop (Thu, 29 Mar 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 need of the country? In attempting to fulfill this, there must be greater coordination with other ministries and other 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 to 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 to teach 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 Chinese 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 's 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 any more. 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 standard?

Some national schools have very high standard already. You look at standards at the Bukit Bintang Girls' School, Convent Bukit Nanas, Victoria Institution. Very high standard. 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. In other words, the gap is there. 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 they have to look at the situation as the education ministry would look at it and give support. So, in other words, whatever blueprints

education goes, 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 persons 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, there is a lot of money 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 I think 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. In other words, 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 by one but the report was not released. But I got a copy of the report. The teachers' union was demanding for the report to be implemented because they have no money. But then the politician implemented it, they picked one and 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. We look at surgeons in hospitals. They don't have to become hospital chiefs or whatever. They become surgeons and raise their fee. Why should we make a good surgeon an administrator?

Just to give them money.

Right. So, now they said, no, make teachers go up the profession without leaving teaching. And third thing I was talking about, after five or six years, automatic promotion. Because, otherwise, until they retire they get nothing. This is being done. And then I said all headmasters before they are chosen to become headmasters must go for a training course and you choose the better ones and make them headmasters. Don't appoint them and then send them for training. You may have made the wrong choice. They are doing that now.

Don't you think headmasters should be more autonomous instead of always waiting for 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 with one thing. We have for example today, the complaint that at secondary school, students do not know how to read and write. Now, this function of 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.

And that time you said let's select who should be in class A or class B. What for? But there is a time when you train them. You have remedial teacher. You make them come up to their level so that those who cannot make it, make them go slower.



Don't push them by age, otherwise they go up by age, not by ability. When they go up by age, not by ability, when they cannot follow the lesson, they get bored. When they get bored, they could drop out.

Why do they get bored? Because they could not master what you teach them. 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 too. Because people in town start kindergarten at the age of four. And those in the kampung start at five or six. How can you compete?

The rural students cannot compete with the urban students?

Yes.

Maybe we should have compulsory kindergarten and reduce primary school by one year?

That's what I said. But the point is, if you want to do that, to have kindergartens, do we have enough trained teachers for them?

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 think the ministry must have been doing a very thorough study of the situation. I find the suggestions in it are all very relevant. My question is not whether it is relevant or not. My question is, in order to achieve a target, there must be an efficient delivery system. Delivery system depends from the bottom to the top, from the top to the bottom. The top means the capability of the ministry to implement it must be there. This is dependent on the ability of the officers to make sure it can be achieved. To achieve this, it must have the support of not only the education ministry but other ministries which must give them assistance. This needs an increase in the number of public-trained teachers.

Then the question to ask is, do we have enough people to train the teachers? Training teachers means ... I cannot train the person who is teaching in Kuala Lumpur the same way I would teach the person teaching in Ulu Kelantan. But what we are doing now is the same type of training. Same spoon. The approach has got to be different. Is our delivery system polished enough to deliver?

Secondly, this has got to be supervised. People at the state level and district level, can they supervise efficiently? Do they understand the situation? Thirdly, can the headmasters give proper guidance to the teachers? Lastly, are the teachers trained and committed to deliver?

It looks simple. But can teachers teach properly? I have complaints about teachers... And can the headmasters give guidance if the teachers have problems. Can the headmasters do this, do that? Do we have the right type of headmasters? Can people in the state and district education offices give guidance?

Lastly, people who train the teachers. Do they understand their problem and train them the way they should be trained in the teachers' training colleges? You can increase the number of lecturers. It is (still) difficult. I am not blaming the ministry, but it is a gigantic task. It is not as simple as it looks.

But it has to be done?

I feel the guideline has been given. With people committed to it, some (recommendations) would be achieved. We must not be too optimistic to say all will be achieved. No. But, I think some must be achieved. But to achieve this, as I said, there has to be a concerted effort. There must be commitment. There must be knowledge by all those who are going to implement it, from the top to the bottom. Support, knowledge, commitment.

And then this must be followed by another blueprint?

Not necessarily. I would say after five years, because this is meant for the Ninth Malaysia Plan...

This is meant for the Ninth Malaysia Plan?

Yes, it is for 2006-2010.

It coincides with the Ninth Malaysia Plan?

No, it is actually Malaysia Plan but education is part of it. So I think yes, after the Ninth Malaysia Plan we should look at it, what has been achieved. And then perhaps, mount steps again to say, well, we have achieved this, now we are to achieve this. So it would go on. It should be. Because conditions will change. For example, in about five years' time we may have schools with water, electricity and all those facilities but maybe, knowledge is still not there. Facilities are there, knowledge not there. We have mid-term study, knowledge not there. Maybe parents' involvement. But parents will have to be educated to help.

Any last words you want to add about this blueprint?

It is a comprehensive plan. It has a very noble objective. But to make the plan successful, we have to ensure there will be a very efficient implementation. For this, we have to look at the machinery for the delivery system. The machinery has got to be greased by people who must be knowledgeable and implementors who must be committed. They must look at this education plan as a personal commitment that they must achieve rather than a work requirement.

Our education system has gone through several changes. With the Barnes Report for a short while, Fenn Wu Report and Razak Report which established more or less what we have when we gained independence. But why the need for these reports?

Let me put it this way. First of all, the British ... felt obliged to have Malay schools because they are coming to a country where the Malays are the ruling race. So it is a duty of the British government to provide education for the people.

The British had an intention. The bumiputras should be given education but they must not be given a high level of education. So, must be primary level only and no English must be taught. The reason is this. If they know English they will know their (British) secrets. If they become too educated then they may rebel against the government. So, give them, like that. So they become farmers, fishermen, padi planters and rubber tappers.

Postman, maybe?

No. Those are their objectives: fishermen, padi planters and rubber tappers. Police and all that are in addition to those. That is not the intention of the British. But, that level. There were the times after that, some of the British people felt guilty. Why must we be treated like this?

Secondly, people who were working as clerks and all were sometimes imported from India, Sri Lankan Tamils and all that. The railway services were (staffed by) Tamils. So the Malays were neglected. So some of them felt this is not right. And the Malays were demanding: Why are we not given a chance?

So they said, okay, let's improve the education system of the Malays. So the Barnes Report was a committee chaired by Barnes to look at the system. The Barnes Report suggested Malays be given a chance to learn English. Therefore, the medium of instruction at all schools must be Malay at primary level, secondary level mixed with English, to give them a chance, so that they can go up. When they said that, the Chinese were not satisfied. Because if the system is going to be in Malay medium, what happens to Chinese schools?

So, in the same year 1951, they had another committee by Fenn Wu and Fenn Wu, of course, disagreed with what Barnes said. Because if you do that, you are supporting Malay education, what happens to Chinese education? That is the automatic reaction. So, therefore, the whole thing came to nothing. They said let's look at the two reports. Let's have a review of this.

Therefore, there was another committee to review it. That committee came up with a very short report of about a few pages only and the committee says we have to keep everything in the balance, we should not do this. Comes the ordinance, it says, oh we have to raise Malay education but to raise it we have to think in terms of improving the qualifications of teachers, there was no money. And then they said, forget it. And it was forgotten.

Now, independence was in 1957. In 1956, the British already saw the country was moving towards independence .. and so Tun Razak was made to look into what should be the education of independent Malaysia. That's why in 1956, a year before independence came the Razak Report. But that could not be implemented until it became an Act.

But Razak says, 'within five years, my report must be revised because circumstances will change'. And if circumstances change, then the demand will be different because constraints will be different. So Rahman Talib came up. That was 1960. With the Rahman Talib and Razak reports together - Razak report the main thing, Rahman Talib revised or review actually - that combined, produced the Education Act 1961.

What was the main basis of the Razak Report?

It has three of four things. One, the main medium of instruction must be Malay. Second, the Malay schools will be extended to have secondary level education. Third, education must be provided to the rural areas as well so that everybody will have a chance. Razak Report also says the Chinese and Tamil schools will continue. And at that time there were also the English schools. But the main medium of instruction, means the most important school, must be sekolah kebangsaan.



Sekolah Kebangsaan came about after the Razak Report, right, as before that it was Sekolah Melayu?

Right, because they want to differentiate between national and not national. So, kebangsaan is national school.

What happened to the national school? Originally was it universally accepted?

When it was presented to parliament, it became an Act, it was accepted. That is why you have sekolah kebangsaan now, we do not change.

Why was the Malay language chosen as the medium of instruction?

I have my own view about this. Some people say Malays are the majority and the language of this country is Malay. But there are some who opposed, why Malay? But to me, it is important to recognise one thing, which I think people don't see. Indonesia accepted Malay as their language but in fact, at that time the most developed language was the Jawa language. Bahasa yang paling ramai pentuturnya, Bahasa Jawa. Most of the Indonesians are in Jawa. So, in terms of population, Javanese are the biggest (group). So, Jawa was the main language. And it is also a rich language.

But we must remember, why did Soekarno choose Bahasa Melayu? Because, the lingua franca of the whole nusantara is Bahasa Melayu. If you go to Celebes, it is the Malay language. Sumatra bahasa. Malaysia orang Melayu. Brunei orang Melayu. Singapore orang Melayu. So, the language around this nusantara is Malay.

People associate the language as belonging to the Malays, I don't say that, this is the language of the nusantara. The lingua franca. If we use other language, it becomes odd. So, since the Javanese and the Jawa language were very developed, Soekarno was afraid the Javanese could not accept the Malay language, so he made Malay language as the Indonesian language so that there is political meaning of Malay language. The same goes for the English language today where in America, they said it is the American language. But the Malays don't change it, we still use English language.

So the reason was it is the lingua franca, that was why we chose it as our national language?

Yes. Even the Dutch use that language. Raffles also use the language. ??? People say it is the Malay language, but this has nothing to do with the Malays, this is the language of the nusantara. That was the way I see it. I am not saying this was the thinking of the politicians in those days. It is my own interpretation. Because if we chose another language, it won't fit in. In the end, when we speak to the Bruneians, they don't understand. We talk to Sumatrans, they don't understand. The Javanese can talk to the Singaporeans but we cannot.

In our education system there has been a lot of evolution and changes. Do you think politics plays a role in this evolution? Don't you think we should have an independent board to look at this?

No. Politics must play a role. Politics is the power of the country. Nothing can change unless the power allows it to change. You look at the Razak Report which says Malay language is the medium of instruction. That is a political thing. Because, if you see, in our country there are four principles. First is the acceptance of Islam as the official religion. Second, Malay as the national language. Third, the dignity of the Rulers must be preserved. Fourth, the privilege of the Malays today must be preserved.

These are the four fields in the country's politics. If they are not taken care of, politics will be in chaos. So, politics determines it. When we asked for the Malay Language to be the national language and it was agreed by the British government, it became a basis for politics.

The Constitution was formed because of politics. And in the Constitution it says the Malay Language is the medium of instruction. So, we cannot do without politics because politics determines it all... So we accept what politics says. We cannot do without politics. If we want to change a certain system, politics can change it, we can't do it. Politics carries out changes through

parliament and in parliament, they are all politicians.

But in some countries like Britain, they have a board which is independent of politics.

There are boards independent of politics. It is possible. But finally, it has to be submitted and accepted by politics because politics will provide the funds. The vote, the allocation of budget must be approved by parliament. Even if the board accepts it, but if politics does not, there would be no allocation and it could not be implemented.

There have been complaints that there is too much Islam in the national schools these days. What do you think?

It is a yes and a no. Sometimes it is true. Sometimes, perhaps, we went overboard. But I feel we must have a balance. We need Islam because Islam must not be seen as a mere religion but as a way of life. And most of our way of life now must be corrected.

Corruption happens because we do not follow the path fixed by Islam. But we should not say everything is Islam. It is just the way of life. And the way of life which changes. That is why we have Islam Hadhari, for example. We want to progress based on the right track determined by Islam. If people don't follow it, there will be certain implications.

We should not say everything we do is according to what Islam wants. Because, to those who don't understand, they will think Islam is asking too much. But, in fact, Islam only requires us to do one thing - to do good, do the right thing. That is Islamic teaching. We should not stress on it too much. Instead, we should just do it.

Secondly, we must also think, during pre-independence days, we have missionary schools. St John's Institution, St Michael's Institution. And in these schools they taught Bible study. But we didn't say anything. And sometimes, in the morning, they have their assemblies. And they even have the cross in their schools. At that time I didn't hear any protest from the Malays. Why do we protest now?

There should be a reason why people protest. I would say, let us not be extreme. If we go beyond the boundary, people will protest but if it is done in a proper way, people should not protest because in those days we never protested.

--- end ---