Learning will only be meaningful if it truly empowers students, the most important stakeholders in our schools. >12,13 & 14

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A need to review the system

The National Philosophy of Education aims to create holistic individuals but we do not seem to be producing such students.

By CHELSEA L. Y. Ng and PRIYA KULASAGARAN

The National Philosophy of Education aims to create holistic individuals but we do not seem to be producing such students.

The late Prof Datuk Dr Syed Hussein Alatas once likened the education system to another Malaysian grous - roads ridden with potholes.

“The potholes grow bigger, accidents happen, even loss of life, but the potholes continue to be ignored with no one wanting to take responsibility,” said the former Universiti Malaya vice-chancellor when speaking at a national education conference in 2000.

Any discourse on the current state of our schools causes fireworks, even among the most boring of personalities. Remarks range from “our education system is a mess, it’s the Government’s fault” to “No, it is the teacher who must be blamed” or even that “students nowadays are different, they are just impossible to teach”.

Fingers are pointed at parents too, as some firmly believe that teachers are just standard baby-sitters in school while parents slog and slave for money.

There are kernels of truth in each of these remarks, but all these perceived problems do not appear everywhere and to everyone all at once.

Contrary to the nostalgia over how wonderful Malaysian schools used to be for our baby-boomer generations, this decay of the education system did not happen overnight.

The nature of economy, the lower levels of competition, and the strong community systems then may have simply masked the static nature of schools.

A high school diploma could still get you a decent job, so perhaps we didn’t care to look too deeply at the possible cracks in the system.

Also, the best schools then were mostly accessible to a minority of the population; the better-off, the urban, and the elite.

The students of yore were responsible for mapping out the country of today — if schools then were successful in breeding critical thinking intellectuals, how did we arrive at the current situation?

We have come a long way in terms of increasing access to education from the days of Independence: from a literacy rate of 48% in 1957, the latest United Nations statistics in 2009 indicate that 93% of Malaysians are literate.

But somewhere down the road, the cracks we previously ignored have turned into significant gaps, and we can’t move forward until all the potholes are plugged.

Reform, revamp, rehaul

A cursory glance at media headlines over the past decade or so suggest that the education system has been in a continuous state of reform.

In between official plans of reform are numerous calls by education stakeholders giving their two cents worth; when push comes to shove, the situation tends to boil down to educators demanding for better benefits, parents calling for lower expenses and extra classes, and employers crying out for skilled workers.

We fail to realise that the only important stakeholders are the students, and the fundamental reason for education is to empower individuals to live meaningful lives.

During pedagogy training, teachers are taught to fall back on the National Philosophy of Education as a mother-of-all-guides for their profession.

Established in 1987, the National Philosophy of Education states that education is the holistic development of “individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious”.

It further adds that education should be designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are “knowledgeable and competent”, “possess high moral standards”, “responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being”, and will “contribute to the betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.”

For some teachers, the philosophy contains “big words that exist merely in theory”.

“In reality, schools want to keep the students under their control. No questions should be asked,” senior teacher Sheila retorts.

“Humanisation? How can students learn that in schools when schools carry out ‘body checks’?” she says, claiming that her school’s administrators ignored her protestations.

“We do not need to search for prohibited items to the extent of stripping our students off their dignity. We should discipline them but not insult them.”

It is common to hear teachers using inappropriate words to describe and chide young pupils such as calling them “monkeys”, “goats” and “cows” while ushering them to their respective classrooms.

There is also the constant complaint by teachers about paper work and writing reports.

“Teachers who cannot write reports or do not have basic computer skills should not be allowed to teach. They should be repatriated back to schools to learn!” says a former secondary school teacher.

Meanwhile, genuine teachers just make use of their own resources to survive within the system. They have no qualms in spending their own money on the classroom activities.

Some say they use their own broadband in school because the network provided in school does not work most times, or promise their students lessons via LCD projector screenings once a week to promote enthusiasm in learning.

Still others sacrifice time with their own children to act as surrogate parents to their young charges in the classroom.

The institutionalised nature and design of schools mean that students are treated like camp prisoners; good schools minimise this with dedicated teachers and visionary school heads.

Schools or factories?

It is strange that although everyone acknowledges the “changing global landscape”, our schools remain as the industrial-era brick-houses that were their origins.

Even now when we speak of revolutionising the education sector, most seem to be enamoured with employable graduates with “marketable” skills - this is one crucial purpose of education, but it seems rather limiting to view children merely as commodities to be churned out for...
learners failed to keep up: the strict separation of subjects left students with knowledge that “lacked usefulness and functionality” in the real world; and even the design of schools was not conducive to learning.

Although the 1979 report led to big improvements in the school curriculum, the core issues raised then remain true today as we continue to bemoan excessive testing and ranking.

When teachers and students resort to “spotting” questions in upcoming national examinations, this is simply a sophisticated form of cheating that circumvents the purpose of undergoing examinations in the first place.

Tests, key-performance indicators, and measurement tools of the same ilk are merely crude estimates of learning – a string of numerical scores cannot articulate meaning on its own. A more useful assessment is one that allows students to directly justify that they have grasped a particular concept or theory.

In this regard, school-based assessments are now seen as an alternative to high-stakes testing.

It is too early to determine the overall efficacy and reliability of these assessments, but when the proposal to abolish public examinations in favour of school-based assessments was made public, various parties voiced out concern over possible bias, leaks and manipulation, as well as a general lowering of standards.

The implicit message here is that we don’t trust our schools to assess students’ learning abilities; ironically, when students under-perform schools suffer the blame as well.

Going back to the National Philosophy of Education, the overarching idea of education that both policy-makers and laymen talk about is one that values learning and knowledge – a noble and humanistic view.

Why is it then, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty details and action-plans, we fall back to the checklist mentality of production assembly lines?

The big picture and the small details

From the National Key Results Areas (NKRA) to the ministry’s own five-year blueprints, it is fair to say that policy-makers do not lack vision in coming up with improvements to the education system.

The latest in these attempts at change is the i-Think programme launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak last month, aimed at inculcating critical thinking skills among students.

Using the Thinking Maps tools developed by American researcher Dr David Hyerle, the initiative is a collaboration between the Special Innovation Unit (UNIK), the Malaysia Innovation Agency, and the Education Ministry.

The pilot project had started in ten randomly selected schools across the country last year and will be rolled out to all schools by 2014.

UNIK chief executive officer Datuk Dr Kamal Jit Singh explains that this is first school-based project for UNIK.

“We started seeing results in just two months – there was a dramatic culture shift in classrooms, as students were actively participating in lessons and asking questions.”

“The whole idea of this (project) is to equip teachers with the tools they need to spark critical thinking so that they can go on to apply them in whatever lessons they conduct.”

“You can’t have creativity without critical thinking; the latter acts as a ‘reality check’ and helps students distinguish between facts and opinion,” he says.

He adds that the bulk of RM5mil price tag for the pilot programme went towards training the teachers.

“We may only be able to see the full results of the programme in five years time, when these students go out into the work force armed with problem-solving, decision-making and communication skills,” he says.

While the initiative itself has noble intentions, how will it fit within the current education framework?

While reform plans are fantastic on paper, the devil is in the details; how many times have we read news of unprofessional and unethical conduct by those within the system only to have them get away with a slap on the wrist?

The pressing concern is that if we are stuck in a vicious cycle of expecting indifferent people to execute excellent ideas, the ripple effect of inefficiency will spread throughout the system.

Real change will be more painful but with pain, there will be...
At the heart of a public school system is a belief in the common good - we care about the education of our neighbour's children as much as we do for our own. This is not just for the sake of altruism or being politically correct, as there are practical and economical reasons for fighting for brilliant schools that are readily accessible to all.

By providing an avenue for social mobility and narrowing the income gap, a strong education system translates into less crime and social ills.

By equipping our students with both scientific reasoning and artistic philosophy, we will not just have a better leverage in the proverbial "marketplace" but a richer Malaysian culture as well.

By allowing students to pursue their talents based on their interests and ability, innovation and creativity will naturally grow without the need for special intervention.

We tend to forget that true innovation does not need policy nor a grand masterplan - it rests on the shoulders of ordinary people working to improve the way we do things and the way we connect with the world.

**Learning from Finland**

FINLAND entered into the mainstream discourse on education after their strong showing in the PISA survey. Conducted every three years by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the survey compares 15-year-olds internationally in reading, mathematics and science, and Finland has consistently ranked highly in all three areas since 2000. Finnish students' performance only dipped in 2009, as students from Shanghai, China bagged the top spot.

Since then, scores of educators and policy-makers worldwide (including Malaysia) have flocked to the country to see what they were getting right.

In his book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*, the Finnish Education Ministry's Center for International Mobility director Pasi Sahlberg writes that the Finnish educational level before the 1960s was "close to that of Malaysia and Peru".

Following dramatic changes around the 1970s and onwards, the Finns' approach to reform may surprise Malaysians - there are no standardised tests, at least until students get to the upper-secondary level, teacher training programmes are among the most selective in the country, and a masters' degree is required to enter the profession.

Teachers are trained to assess students and provide individualised grading for each child. Incompetent teachers are dealt with by the principal, and there is a strong teachers' union.

Additionally, there are virtually no private schools, and all pupils receive free school meals, healthcare access, psychological counseling, and individualised student guidance.

Critics rightly point out that the lessons of Finland are not readily applicable here, citing the country's mostly homogeneous population of about 5.4 million as an example.

But the country's immigrants have doubled in the past decade, to no ill-effect to Finland's PISA scores.
Every other day we receive letters from our readers commenting on our education system. Most complain about the system...
One size can't fit all: if students are only booksmart, they may have problems fitting into the modern workplace.

Balanced individuals: A healthy mix of both the arts and sciences will create holistic students.
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The ‘X’ factor: Well rounded students will always have an edge over the others.
Special attention: Not all students are created equally, some may need more support than others.

Out of the box: We need students who can navigate unchartered waters for real innovation.