

Need to Produce Thinking Students

✘by Nik Roskiman Abdul Samad

There has to be a system able to educate and equip the people with all the tools necessary to face the complex pressures of modern society.

WE celebrated Teachers' Day a few weeks ago. Talk of education always brings to my mind a speech given by Dorothy L. Sayers at Oxford in 1947, which was later printed in essay form bearing the title *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

Although Sayers was not an educationist, but rather a novelist, her profound critique of the modern education system has initiated a classical education movement in the US and Europe.

I first came across her ideas several years ago, and those ideas have stayed in my mind. And I find them to be relevant more so now as our government is planning to review or revamp our education system and curriculum.

It is indeed timely for the Government to introduce a new education system that is able to really educate and equip the people with all the tools necessary to face the complex pressures of modern society.

This is the crux of Sayer's critique of the modern education system: the inability to produce educated people equipped with the necessary tools of modern life.

Our national education system has failed, the public has said. They are clamouring for a better education system to replace the present one. Our system is accused of being exam-oriented and produces trained "parrots". Why?

One of the reasons is that our system today is burdening students with too many subjects. Since there are too many subjects, teachers are not able to concentrate on developing personalities and individual characters. Their focus is on completing the entire syllabus of every subject, otherwise the students may not be able to answer questions in the coming term examinations.

No time is spared for inter-personal discussions, counselling or informal advice-giving sessions between teachers and students. The situation in our country is worsened by the attitudes of some of our ministers or politicians, who want to have their say with regard to the education system.

It is as though every minister deems he has the right to have his say in deciding what subjects should or should not be taught in our schools, without being duly qualified.

When we feel that the trend is towards Information Technology (IT), we want subjects related to IT to be taught in schools.

Later, when we dispatched our *angkasawan* to the moon, we wanted Astronomy to be part of our curriculum.

When we feel entrepreneurship is important, we want it to be part of the subjects taught in schools.

Recently, we seem to feel that national unity and patriotism is at stake, therefore we demand that these subjects be included in the national curriculum. It goes on endlessly.

We have actually lost sight of what education is all about and what its true objective entails.

Education is not about teaching particular "subjects". Neither it is about the number of subjects taught in schools. It is about nurturing a human being to be a "good man".

Modern students today are certainly taught more subjects, but that does not mean they are actually "good" or know more; nor does it mean they are better equipped than those before them.

Compared with students of the Athenian Middle Ages, who only studied three subjects at the trivium and four subjects at the quadrivium, for example, today's students should perform better, considering their intellectual growth.

But this is not the case. Many a time an interview panel is frustrated with the performance of our graduates, despite their having spent more than a decade at the primary and secondary education levels and approximately four years at the tertiary level.

They certainly "studied" hundreds of subjects and, yet, they do not know the basics, have no confidence in speaking, no critical and logical thought when arguing, have no common sense, rational thought and so on. Why?

Because they had never been taught to think, how to use reason or how to argue during their entire "formal" education.

The only reason they have succeeded thus far is, perhaps, purely because they were good at memorising data – not that their intellect has been developed.

The findings of child development psychiatrists and research workers have emphasised the deep impressions early experiences have on children and the lasting effects of such impressions.

Comenius, in *The School of Infancy*, Montessori, in his *The Secret of Childhood*, and countless others have stressed the importance of right education at an early age.

In Islam, emphasis is given even when the parent is still searching for his spouse, seeking only for one with upright religious bearing since their children will be affected by their parents' character.

At their early stage, children should be taught the proper use of the tools of learning before they begin to apply these to "subjects", which should only be taught at a later stage.

At the foundational stage, they should only be taught three things, the trivium: Grammar, Logic (Dialectic), and Rhetoric.

This is quite similar to the traditional Islamic primary education where children at an early age should be taught, among other things, the Qur'an, language, literature (*adab*), ethics (*akhlaq*) and logic (*mantiq*).

Only at the secondary or university levels perhaps whatever subjects suit the national interest and the contemporary age may be introduced.

In general, children in Malaysia are reluctant to go to school, unlike children in the developed countries who exhibit eagerness and enthusiasm.

Children in Europe find school very interesting, and their teachers to be very loving and friendly. In Malaysia, even before going to school, we have a hard time with our children.

Teachers are assumed to be fierce because of their demeanor, like "teacher-cum-police" officers.

They also envision being bombarded with too much information that they are required to know, not to mention writing.

But their ability to reflect, think and ponder is not being groomed and developed. They are required to memorise data where all the answers are given.

Our education policy makers should sit down seriously with educationists and "experts" to come up with a better education policy for the sake of our future generations.

We have had enough of the same old moans whenever review of our education system is mentioned. Nothing substantial has been done thus far. Even the perennial issue of heavy school bags has not been effectively resolved yet.

Hopefully the "people's Prime Minister" will look into this matter more urgently.

Source: [Archive The Star 2 June 2009](#)