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Comment: Wisdom and the educational revolution

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AMBROSE Bierce wrote in *The Devil's Dictionary* that education can be defined as "that which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding".

The suggestion made by Bierce is that education itself does not develop wisdom but rather, can either help those who have insight to understand their limitations or hide understanding of shortcomings from those who do not have it. Wisdom then appears, according to Bierce's definition, to be the intangible element that defines how we make use of our education and what lessons we take from it.

How then to understand wisdom? How important is it?

Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, said that: "You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions." From this we can see that wisdom in education is signified by the quality of our capacity to ask questions. Asking the right queries or being able to enquire is the marker of wisdom and excellence. The quality of our questions is a key guide.

Philosophy teaches us that wisdom has many facets; it is often characterised by the virtues of prudence, balance, reflection and understanding. Informing our questions by these virtues is truly the mark of the wise, and an education system that instills these practices and capacities in its students will be world-class indeed.

This brings us to the recent release of the 10th Malaysia Plan. It aims to "develop and retain a First World talent base". This is to be done in part by "revamping the education system to significantly raise student outcomes".

Such aims are laudable and important milestones of Malaysia's advancement. Indeed the centrality of education to Malaysia's economic and social development is critically acknowledged in the 10th Malaysia Plan. This recognition is part of a broader understanding that education is now the critical driver for Malaysia's growth and development as a vigorous and dynamic knowledge economy. Specifically, the 10th Malaysia Plan points out: "The education system is critical in strengthening the competitiveness of the country and in building 1Malaysia.

"The status of national schools will be elevated to become the school of choice for a broader segment of Malaysians by continually raising standards and closing the achievement gap across national schools."

The focus on developing the attributes of human capital is an understandable aim for Malaysian education and the commitment to raising student outcomes in a measurable and verifiable way is critical to Malaysia's ongoing development.

Without some way of knowing whether we have achieved our goals, the education revolution that Malaysia so sorely needs will not come to fruition. The government's commitment to "unlocking the potential of every child in Malaysia" is also laudable.

Given all of this, it appears that much of the commentary applauding the 10th Malaysia Plan is well founded and it is hoped that the aims of the plan can be met and kept. But before we move on we ought to stop and consider the values and characteristics of students that will also be produced in Malaysian schools. For education is not simply about improving our knowledge, critical as that is, it is also concerned with something deeper.

An education properly understood is also about values and ultimately with that hard to pin down notion of wisdom. Cultivating wisdom in students is something that is far more difficult to measure and perhaps to assess as well. Yet we all know that an education system that simply produced students who can close the achievement gap, as measured by international comparisons such as trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Programme for International Student Assessment also needs to be complemented by something deeper and more intangible: the cultivation of wisdom. A wise student is not merely a clever one and the aims of education properly understood are to advance our human capital in tandem with our wisdom and values. Such an education is truly creative in the sense argued by the late Syed Hussein Alatas, insofar as it involves not merely mimicry and copying of skills or rote repetition of facts and knowledge but rather an attenuating of these abilities to a deeper sense of prudence, balance, reflection, understanding and finally, dignity.

Educational reform needs to encourage critical enquiry, deliberation and questioning but it also has to be imbued with a deeper sense of purpose. This suggests the importance of wisdom and values for education, and implies that knowledge and skills as such must always be tempered by them. We return to both Bierce's and Naguib's insights cited at the beginning of this piece. Bierce's view, which is often thought of as overly cynical, is that education can help students understand not only how to interpret and change the world but also provide insight, when tempered with wisdom, into our limitations and arguably our responsibilities.

We return to the importance of questions as pointed out by Naguib. The question for educational public policy in Malaysia is the following: in the creation of First World talent base in Malaysian schools and universities how much consideration will also be given to the inculcation of local wisdom?

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