

**THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING
A PEACEFUL AND HARMONIOUS
SOCIETY IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM**

By

**Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Hj. Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad
Vice Chancellor
University of Malaya**

Peace Lecture

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Challenges of the New Age

We are on the threshold of the third millennium. In not so many months from now the present century will become a past tense. The impending departure of the second millennium has made many people think what is in store for them in the future.

As we enter the new millennium, the world is at the crossroads. The new age can be defined as an age of high technology; an age of networking, an age of globalization; an age of urbanization and environmental concern; and also an age when societies become more open and liberalized culturally. We must understand the process of global changes and prepare ourselves to meet these changes. Only those capable of adjusting themselves to this new age will be able to survive and thrive in the future. Those who are not fully prepared will be overwhelmed by the tide of changes and will be helplessly swept into oblivion. Only those who are determined to be strong and well equipped will be able to stand firm against the currents, direct them, and be the architect of their own destiny.

We must realize that a peaceful and harmonious society do not just happen. It takes every bit of combined energy, talent, desire, and determination we

can muster to make it happen. Above all, we must have a vision. Things we really care about take time to happen. It takes a lot of thought, planning, and prioritizing to implement them. And so it is, if we want to create a peaceful and harmonious society. When we really want something, we must work hard for it and be prepared to make sacrifices.

It is a truism to say that education plays an essential role in building a peaceful and harmonious society in the future. It is one of the principal means available to foster a harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, oppression, ignorance, and war. Thus, it is essential that all people with a sense of responsibility turn their attention to both the aims and means of education.

However, to be an effective means of developing a peaceful and harmonious society, education must be based upon the hope for a world that is a better place to live in, where people will have learned to respect the rights of children, men, and women; to show mutual understanding; and to use advances in knowledge to foster human development rather than to further distinctions between people.

Meaning of Peace

In Malaysia, the fulfillment of the goal to become a developed nation and a highly peaceful and harmonious society depends largely upon our capability to create a nation committed to lifelong learning. That commitment

will be required from individuals, families, organizations, employers, the state, and providers of education. We must understand that learning to live together in peace and harmony is a lifelong process, is a dynamic process, and it is a holistic process. It is done through mutual respect, caring, sharing, compassion, tolerance, and social responsibility, all of which are internalized and practised together to solve problems and to work towards peace and harmony.

What is meant by peace? In the literature, peace has been defined in many different ways:

- Freedom from war or absence of war
- Freedom from public disturbance
- Freedom from disorder
- Freedom from disagreement or quarrels.
- A treaty or agreement to end war
- An undisturbed state of mind
- An absence of mental conflict
- Serenity, calmness, harmony, quiet, tranquillity, order

In the context of our discussion, peace means more than all of these---far more. It means to fulfil our obligations or responsibilities to God, society, nature, and oneself. Peace is a way of life where we build strong relationships with God (*peace with one's Creator*) and society (*peace with people*), strong relationships with environment (*peace with nature*) and oneself (*peace with oneself*). It means to become mature in the sense of

being responsible *to* one's self, *to* one's family, *to* be responsible to society, *to* country, responsible *to* nature, and *to* the Creator.

In a general sense, our role is to champion what is right and fight what is wrong, seek what is true and abandon what is false, cherish what is beautiful and wholesome and avoid what is indecent and corrupted. Learning peace, understanding peace, living peace, sharing peace, and teaching peace will help us strive to build a peaceful and harmonious society.

Education for a Culture of Peace

Learning to live and work together is a skill, a competence, an art, an attitude, a type of behavior, and a way of life fundamental to building a peaceful and harmonious society in the next millennium. We need to transform our culture of intolerance and violence into a culture of tolerance and peace.

What is this culture of peace which we hope to build together? The term culture refers to the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Thus, a *culture of peace* is that set of values, attitudes, traditions, modes of behavior, and ways of life that inspire and promote respect for life and for all human rights, and rejects violence in all its forms, and prevents violent conflicts by tackling their root causes through dialogue and negotiations.

In other words, a culture of peace would demand from all of us a five-fold commitment of the following virtues:

- A culture of servitude and devotion to God and His commandments.
- A culture of non-violence and respect for human rights.
- A culture of tolerance and global understanding
- A culture of democracy and awareness of personal responsibility.
- A culture of social justice and partnership between women and men.

Indeed, we need **an education for a culture of peace**, since a culture of peace is a constructive or transformational process which should begin with each individual member of the society. Education for a culture of peace should focus on the children and youth so that their values and attitudes, modes of behavior, and lifestyles will take root in their hearts and minds early in life and become part of their total personality and behavior. Let our schools be zones of peace and laboratories of learning to live and to work together with others in peace and in solidarity.

Education for a culture of peace begins with the development of inner peace in the minds and hearts of individuals engaged in the search for truth, engaged in the search for knowledge, and understanding of each other's cultures, and the appreciation of shared common values to achieve a better future for ourselves. We need to develop all our potentials to the fullest and align ourselves with correct principles. Belief in God or faith should become the focus of moral values that guide our conduct.

Peace of mind comes when our life is in harmony with true principles and universal values, knowing what is right and wrong and what is good and bad. The greatest battles of life are fought out daily in the silent chambers of the soul. It is futile to fight our battles on the wrong battlefields. By centering our lives on correct principles and universal values, we create a solid foundation for development of all dimensions of our nature. Private victories precede public victories.

Education is the most effective means of preventing violence, disorder, social injustice, and intolerance. The first step in peace education is to teach people what their rights and obligations are, so that they may be respected. Awareness of personal responsibility must be linked to recognition of the value of civic commitment, of joining together with others to solve problems and to work for a just, peaceful and democratic community.

The ultimate goal of education for peace is the development in every individual of a sense of universal values and types of behavior expected that can promote a peaceful society.

Role of Education

Education is viewed by many historians as a force that determines the rise or decline of a civilization. For instance, the closing of the gates of creative thinking and reasoning (creative education) during the fourteenth and

fifteenth centuries and the consequent emergence of passive imitation as the dominant mode of thought in all spheres of life, provided the first impetus for the intellectual decline of the Muslim civilization. The survival of humanity and the formation of a culture or a civilization is a testament to informal and formal education that worked. Effective action that flows from good education assured the survival and development of humanity as a species. The continued propagation of humans throughout the millennia is a direct result of education or ideas that provided for security and well being of humankind. The famous Jean Rousseau (in *Emile*) states that "plants are shaped by cultivation and men by education. We are born weak, we need strength. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown-up is provided by education".

Education is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The end is to become something or achieve some objectives. For instance, the end of education in Islam is to become an obedient and grateful servant of God. Thus, a person should be moulded through education in such a way that he always thinks, plans, and acts according to the Will of his Creator.

Education is a process through which a nation trains its young generation in the art of living and in fulfilling their purpose in life effectively and efficiently. Jacques Delors (in *Learning: The Treasure Within*, 1996) states that not only is education a key factor in economic growth and individual development, it is also a tool for understanding and mastering change. And for Plato (in *the Republic*), proper education of children was the surest way of ensuring the

health, continuity, and productivity of the country. For Prophet Muhammad, infinite possibilities could be realized by sound education and man must always be mindful in order to realize his fullest potentialities. He declares that, "the acquisition of knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and Muslim woman (in *the Hadith*)". The above discussion suggests several major pillars of a good education:

- Through education we learn how to build-up useful knowledge
- Learning how to take positive and meaningful actions.
- Learning how to renew oneself in four key areas of life: physical, social, mental, and spiritual.
- Learning how to live together in peace
- Learning how to solve problems cooperatively
- Learning how to make responsible decisions
- Learning how to become grateful servants of God

In short, education is more than mere public instruction. It is, in fact, a process through which a nation develops self-consciousness among its citizens and is able to pass on its cultural and intellectual heritage to future generations.

Malaysian Experience

In the study of man, there are five major dimensions of his nature which need to be developed. They are: (1) physical, (2) mental, (3) emotional, (4) social, and (5) spiritual. This is the single most powerful investment man can ever make in life, namely investment in ourselves.

Education is at the heart of both personal and community development. Its mission is to enable each of us, without exception, to develop all our talents to the full and to realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal development. In our country, we have taken several major steps to develop the potential for our citizens and communities:

1. Formulation of the National Philosophy of Education:

In Malaysia, humanizing education has received top priority and a clear statement of the National Philosophy of Education has been formulated. Among other things, the National Philosophy of Education articulates the need for all students to receive an integrated education. The aim of education in Malaysia is to produce a "good man" who is also a good Malaysian citizen. The National Education Philosophy makes the development of high moral character an explicit preoccupation of the education enterprise.

2. Establishment of the National Educational System:

Education is a social experience through which children learn about themselves, develop interpersonal skills, and acquire basic knowledge and skills. This experience should begin in early childhood. In Malaysia, early childhood education or pre-school education is included in the National Educational System (the Educational Act 1996). The programs and activities of every kindergarten must be based on the curriculum guidelines for kindergarten approved by the Ministry of Education. From this earlier stage onwards, educational contents are designed to stimulate a love of learning

and knowledge and thus develop the desire and provide the opportunities for learning throughout life.

3. Our government has emphasized the study on values and moral education to develop our spiritual dimension:

In Malaysia, we believe that religious education and moral education have a major contribution to make in the process of building peaceful and harmonious society. For instance, religious education and faith-based moral education provide evidence and examples of ways in which beliefs and values have directly affected people's lives through making choices and selecting of priorities. Thus, at both the primary and secondary school levels, core subjects include Islamic Education for Muslim students and Moral Education for non-Muslim students.

Further, to ensure that public institutions of higher learning (IPTA) in Malaysia offer holistic education, they have been required since 1998 to teach Islamic and Asian Civilizations (i.e. Chinese Civilization, Indian Chinese, Japanese Civilization) . All undergraduate students are required to take this course. Also to ensure that private colleges and universities (IPTS) offer holistic education in line with the country's objectives, they have been required to teach Islamic Education, Moral Education, and Malaysian Studies beginning in January 1999. Malaysian Muslim students are required to take Islamic Education and non-Muslims Moral education. Foreign students must take a course in Malaysian Studies.

4. Information Technology and Globalization:

Malaysian society is undergoing a fundamental transformation from the Industrial Age to the Information Age that will result in a need for fundamental changes to occur in our education programs. The Malaysian Government has taken several initiatives aimed at meeting the challenges of information technology and globalization. For example, the decisions to establish the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is a key strategy adopted to spearhead Malaysia into a sophisticated information society.

The Government has identified a number of priority areas, or flagship applications, for the MSC, all of which have some relevance to the expertise and interests of the education sector in Malaysia. One of the projects under the auspices of the MSC is the setting up of smart schools. The concept of smart learning and smart teaching were developed in order to take advantage of the power of information technology in education and training.

However, smart school is not just about the using of technology to enhance learning and the integration of technology into school curriculum. It involves learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be, learning to communicate, and learning to solve problems in the digital age. The students must become educated and informed users of new technologies. They must attain not only the necessary technical competencies but also an understanding of the broader social implications of technology. The integration of technology into school curricula is no longer a

luxury; it is a prerequisite to survival in a future that will be driven and supported by technology.

In higher education, the move towards digital age takes in two broad forms:

- The setting up of e-universities (multi-media or virtual universities)
- The on-line mode of delivery for some of the courses offered.

What is clear from these new technologies is that higher education institutions in Malaysia will no longer be isolated institutions. There is likely to be more cooperation or collaboration among higher education institutions nationally and internationally. This is in line with a national policy objective to be world class both in learning at all levels and in range of diverse and emerging disciplines.

5. Quality Education:

In the new millennium, quality of higher education will be a major agenda. Institutions of higher education in Malaysia should be of high quality in all their endeavors. They must deliver programs of right quality and to customer satisfaction. In this context, the National Accreditation Board was established. One of the functions of the Board is to set, monitor, and oversee the standard and quality of courses of study and for accreditation of certificates, diplomas, and degrees awarded by private higher education institutions.

In the next millennium, we see higher education in Malaysia gaining in strength through the pursuit of quality and a commitment to higher

standard. The effectiveness of its response will determine its future.

Thus, higher education in Malaysia needs to:

- Be at the leading edge of practice in effective learning and teaching.
- Undertake research that matches the best in the world.
- Be accountable to students and to society
- Be cost-effective in how it goes about its business
- Be part of the conscience of a democratic society.
- Encourage all students to achieve beyond their expectations.

Conclusion

As education institutions in Malaysia approach the new millennium, they should provide for students an understanding of what it will mean to be an educated person in the future. This understanding should serve as the focus of education at all levels. We suggest that that focus should be to equip students with the basic knowledge and skills necessary for them to assume leadership roles wherever their lives may take them. We suggest that the goals of such an education should include the development of a sense of universal values and types of behavior on which a culture for peace and harmony is predicted.

There is no society since the beginning of time that would not desire peaceful and harmonious living, and enjoy the freedom and bounty of God. However, good manners of behavior and ways of life do not come by chance. They are

developed through careful and systematic planning and implementation of the integrated educational programs.

I would like to stress that all things need attention, care, concern, and life is no exception. Life is not something to be treated indifferently or something that simply takes care of itself. True happiness in life does not come from possessions or fame: it comes from the quality of our relationships with the people we love and respect. Good relationships require commitment, humility, patience, and the ability to be big-hearted or magnanimous; to give and forgive. The most important work we do each day is what we can do for our families, what we can do for our fellow citizen, and what we can do for our society.