

Yahaya: You start out as a mediocre teacher, then develop into a good and finally great teacher

ONCE A TEACHER

TAN SRI Dr Yahaya Ibrahim, 82, retired from government service 26 years ago, but is still robust and active, and constantly grappling with the larger questions in life. He wonders what kind of Malaysians we want to create, and consequently, what kind of education system we need to put in place for this to happen. He is passionately committed to early childhood education. He makes clear distinctions between an educated person and a person who is merely literate. He walks up three flights of stairs twice a day without a murmur, to get to his little office on the third floor of a shop house. And he considers a holiday, any day in which he has achieved more than he had set out to do when he planned his day.

'They call me an *ulama* which stands for *usia lanjut masih aktif* (still active despite advancing years). I believe that you need to keep learning and developing yourself no matter what your age. Because when you stop learning, you become old. But I don't only preach lifelong learning, but lifelong contributing. Your knowledge

can only make a difference if you use it to help others in the area you love most and which you are best at.'

For Yahaya, this has always been education. After he retired from government service in 1984, he became the first President of the National Association of Private and Independent Educational Institutions from 1987 to 1994. He also formed the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges in 1977 (later, the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities).

He is chairman and founder of numerous local colleges such as Kolej Bandar Utama, Institut Megatech, Olympia College and lately, the Oasis College. But of late, his focus has been mainly on early childhood education. This is why, 13 years ago, he became involved with Krista Education Sdn Bhd where he is Chairman. Krista Education has franchised 130 early education centres around the country.

'I had always been involved with higher education but my passion is with early childhood education. I needed a platform and found it in Krista, which was already running when I joined it,' he says.

These kindergartens are run based on his philosophy of creating desired Malaysians. Towards this end, he stresses three core values that he insists the teachers inculcate in every child: strong self-discipline, critical creative skills and an inquiring mind.

'Without self-discipline, we can achieve nothing. And even if we did, we would not live up to our full potential,' he says.

Without critical creative skills, he believes that students have neither ideas nor initiative to come up with their own businesses. Instead, they become unthinking citizens, content to be salaried employees for the rest of their lives.

And finally, he points out that Malaysians are not noted for their inquiring minds. 'Our people tend to be quiet and not ask questions because they think it is disrespectful, or they are too lazy to think. This has to change if we are to progress,' he points out.

But these three core skills, though critical in themselves, are not enough. 'God has given us a lot of gifts that we take for granted. It's like taking money from the bank as capital to

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start a business. How you manage the capital is important. You must have an objective and a proper plan in place as to how you are to achieve that. I have divided these gifts into the 4Hs.'

The first 'H' is the head. 'This has to do with your mind and it includes things like examination results. If you have a good mind, you become a good person. If you have a bad mind, you become a wretched, lousy, miserable person.'

The second 'H' is the hands. 'How do you use your hands? Whether you're a cook, a tailor or a surgeon, you need good hands. Sometimes, I ask a mother, which of your daughters can cook well, and she will point to one and say, that one has good hands. The first H and second H have to work together if we are to be successful in life.'

The third 'H' is the heart. 'This is where morality, spirituality and ethics come in. We live in a troubled world because this is largely neglected. Without it, people become corrupt and unjust.'

And the fourth 'H' is health, both mental and physical. 'I worked for the government for 32-and-a-half years and only had 11 days of medical leave in that whole time. I make it a point to go for medical check-ups every eight months. And every morning, I do 40 minutes of exercise, which includes brisk walking as well as bending, stretching and jumping. Before I start, I always drink a glass of warm water and say, God, please grant me additional healthy days of my life. I suggest you do the same. And then believe in it and feel good about it.'

This is why he is a picture of health at 82.

Yahaya has always been a teacher. Even as a child, he was always the 'teacher' in games of make believe with his cousins, standing in front of an imaginary classroom and instructing them in their lessons.

Then World War Two intervened and Yahaya found himself a junior officer in the Japanese navy. He managed to use his position for good. 'There were many people who had been conscripted to



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go to the Death Railway. I managed to pull them out and get them to work for me. We had to construct buildings to store armaments and supplies.

'I learned discipline from the Japanese. And I also learned to look at the positive side of life and never give up too early,' he says.

Once the Japanese had surrendered, Yahaya went back to school. As there were no English schools in Bayan Lepas, which was only a small district at that time, he had to go live with his uncle in town. And this is where he met the famous actor P Ramlee. 'He lived on the same road as my uncle and every morning, I rode on the back of his bicycle to school. At night, I would do my homework with him. He may not have been strong academically but he was gifted in so many other ways. He had the most beautiful handwriting, was an accomplished artist and picked up music untutored. There are not many PhDs out there who could have done as well as he did with a Standard Seven education.'

After school, Yahaya went for his teacher's training in Singapore. 'At the time, Penang, Malacca and Singapore were under one administration known as the Straits Settlement. After a year in Singapore, I was one of only three selected to go to the famous teacher's

training college in Kirkby, UK. That's where I learned about early childhood education and started asking the question I have asked since about the desired Malaysian human being we want to see.'

What had impressed him most about the UK was the way that country had rebuilt itself in such a short time after the devastation of the war. 'We learned about how a people who had been so badly hit could rise again in seven years because of the good system of education and training that the government had put in place over the years. We decided that if they could do it, we could do it too. Our catchphrase was *Malaya boleh*.'

They came back from Kirkby and set about rebuilding the country that had been devastated firstly by war and secondly by the Communist atrocities during the Emergency. Ibrahim was first posted to Malacca where he took up his first teaching post. 'One thing I always emphasized was discipline. If I ask you to bring your homework, your job is to bring your homework. I am not interested in whether you have finished it or not. You could finish it tomorrow. But if you didn't bring it, I would make you stand on the chair. Today, I have many of my former students who are now in high positions coming up to me and saying they are what they are because of the way I treated them. They thank me for it,' he says.

Yahaya points out that every teacher should aspire to be a great teacher. 'You start out as a mediocre teacher, then develop into a good and finally great teacher. A great teacher inspires his students and educates them, bringing about desirable changes in them.'

And how do you become a great teacher? 'Don't say one thing and do another. And always present yourself as a decent fellow. Dress decently. How many people dress decently these days? Education is not merely a matter of paper. It is reflected in your values and behaviour. A person who does not have simple courtesy may be literate but they will never be educated.' **mb**