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Preparing Children to Shape the Future: A Call for Transformative Education

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In today's rapidly evolving world, preparing children for the future is no longer about equipping them with traditional academic knowledge alone; it is about cultivating the ability to think critically, adapt to change, and envision a better tomorrow. Attending the **Dubai Future Forum 2024**, an extraordinary gathering of over 2,500 futurists from across the globe, emphasized this urgency. As humanity faces unprecedented challenges such as climate change,

technological disruptions, and social fragmentation, the question isn't just how to prepare children for the future but how to empower them to actively shape it. Building on the arguments in my previous article, *The Homework Trap: How Excessive Assignments Kill Creativity*, I propose a transformative approach to education that transcends rote learning, fostering future thinking through life skills, health literacy, environmental stewardship, and empathy.

A. Transforming Homework into a Tool for Life

Homework, often criticized for being monotonous and burdensome, can be reimagined as an opportunity to teach life skills and encourage meaningful learning. Imagine a child who, instead of solving repetitive math problems, is tasked with budgeting for a family grocery trip. This exercise not only teaches arithmetic but also financial literacy and decision-making. Similarly, an assignment to prepare a family meal can develop time management, teamwork, and even cultural appreciation by exploring traditional recipes. Such tasks make learning practical and applicable, helping children connect academic knowledge to real-world situations.

In Finland, for instance, the education system's minimal homework approach has shown that less can indeed be more. Students outperform many of their peers globally, not by slogging through tedious assignments but by engaging in hands-on learning and real-world problem-solving. Parents can amplify this approach by turning everyday moments into teachable opportunities, such as involving children in home repairs, gardening, or community volunteering, fostering responsibility and creativity in equal measure.

B. Prioritizing Health for Resilient Futures

Health literacy should be a cornerstone of modern education, especially as global trends point to rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and mental health challenges among youth. Schools

can integrate practical lessons on nutrition, exercise, and mental well-being into their curricula. For instance, students could design a week-long healthy meal plan or monitor their screen time versus physical activity to understand the impact of their choices.

The benefits extend beyond individual well-being. A child who learns to value health grows into an adult who makes informed decisions, reducing long-term healthcare burdens on society. Japan's "Shokuiku" (food education) program is a compelling example, teaching children the importance of balanced diets and sustainable eating practices through cooking classes and farm-to-table experiences. Parents can reinforce these values at home by involving children in meal preparation or fostering healthy habits like shared family walks or mindfulness exercises.

C. Nurturing Environmental Responsibility

Environmental challenges, from climate change to resource depletion, are no longer distant threats—they are pressing realities that today's children will inherit. Education must empower young minds to understand their role in safeguarding the planet. Assignments could involve calculating the household's carbon footprint or creating plans to reduce waste. Schools might organize eco-challenges where students compete to conserve the most water or electricity over a month, linking abstract environmental concepts to tangible actions.

A deeper engagement can be achieved through experiential learning. Field trips to recycling facilities, nature reserves, or renewable energy plants can vividly illustrate the interconnectedness of human actions and environmental health. Parents, too, can play a part, whether by setting up a composting system at home or leading family discussions on sustainable living. Imagine children as active participants in environmental innovation, designing eco-friendly products in

workshops or presenting green solutions at school fairs. These activities cultivate not only awareness but also a proactive mindset.

D. Teaching Empathy and Peace in a Divided World

In an era marked by growing polarization and societal challenges, embedding empathy and peace-building into Malaysian education is not just desirable but essential for nurturing a harmonious multi-ethnic society. Grounded in Malaysia's Islamic heritage, the principles of peace and compassion can serve as guiding lights in shaping our education system. Islam itself emphasizes the importance of harmony, as seen in the Quranic verse: *"And make peace between yourselves"* (Al-Anfal 8:1). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) exemplified these principles throughout his life, consistently preaching love, mercy, and reconciliation, even toward those who opposed him. For instance, his forgiveness of the people of Mecca after the conquest serves as a timeless lesson in the power of peace and restraint.

Building on these values, our education system must move beyond traditional exam-focused assessments to include peace-building as a central component. Historical lessons can highlight individuals who championed unity and reconciliation, both globally and locally. Alongside figures like Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai, Malaysia's own Tunku Abdul Rahman serves as a profound example of fostering harmony through negotiation and inclusivity. The Prophet's diplomacy in the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, where he prioritized peace over immediate victory, is another powerful example that can be integrated into school curricula to inspire students with practical lessons on conflict resolution and patience.

Literature classes offer a unique opportunity to cultivate empathy and foster a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Students could engage with works such as *Salina* by A. Samad Said or poems by Usman Awang, which explore themes

of resilience, understanding, and social harmony. Assignments could ask students to reflect on how these works align with Islamic values of justice, mercy, and community, encouraging critical thinking and personal connection to these universal principles.

Practical activities can bring these lessons to life. Role-playing exercises, for example, could simulate scenarios where students practice conflict resolution, negotiation, and compromise skills rooted in the Prophet's own leadership style. Collaborative projects, such as creating a mural symbolizing Malaysia's *Rukun Negara* values or organizing interfaith and intercultural events celebrating Malaysia's festivals, can deepen students' appreciation of the country's diversity. These activities should be integrated into the evaluation system, demonstrating that empathy, teamwork, and peace-building are as valuable as academic achievements.

At home, parents can reinforce these values by modeling kindness and generosity in everyday interactions. Encouraging children to participate in acts of compassion, such as helping a neighbor, donating to charity, or volunteering in community events, mirrors the Prophet's (PBUH) emphasis on serving humanity. Such actions embody the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, mercy to all creation.

E. Cultivating Future Thinking

Future thinking involves the ability to anticipate challenges and envision solutions. Schools can introduce scenario planning exercises, asking students to imagine life in 2050 and brainstorm ways to address issues like urban overcrowding or renewable energy. For instance, a project might involve designing a futuristic, eco-friendly city or creating a business plan for a sustainable enterprise. Such exercises not only spark imagination but also build critical skills in problem-solving and innovation.

Tuition centers and extracurricular programs could teach

children to approach uncertainty with confidence through design-thinking workshops, coding challenges, or debates on emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain. These activities help children see themselves as agents of change rather than passive recipients of the future.

Toward a Transformative Vision of Education

Education must evolve from a system of memorization and standardization to one that inspires creativity, adaptability, and empathy. By prioritizing life skills, health, environmental stewardship, and peace education, we prepare children not only to navigate the challenges of the 21st century but to lead with purpose and vision. This transformation doesn't require radical overhauls—just a shift in mindset and a commitment to making learning meaningful.

As educators, parents, and communities, we have a profound responsibility to equip children with the tools to shape the future. The changes we make today—no matter how small—can lay the foundation for a generation that is resilient, compassionate, and capable of creating a better tomorrow. Let us start now by rethinking how we teach and inspire. After all, the future is not something we wait for; it is something we build together.***

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