

Headline	Teaching moral values and ethics		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	16 May 2015	Color	Black/white
Section	Local News	Circulation	149,000
Page No	16	Readership	447,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	269 cm ²
Journalist	DR VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN	AdValue	RM 4,883
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 14,650



Teaching moral values and ethics

LIFELONG PROCESS: Reflect on responsibilities of educators on Teachers' Day



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EVERY year on May 16, schools in Malaysia celebrate Teachers' Day to commemorate the dedication and effort that teachers put in to educate their students. This year the theme for Teachers' Day is "*Guru: Membina Ilmu Menyempurnakan Akhlak*", meaning "Teachers: Building Knowledge Perfecting Morals".

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, who was a Muslim theologian, jurist, philosopher and mystic of Persian descent, has a complete explanation of what *akhlak* is all about. He defines *akhlak* as inborn characteristics within each individual that is portrayed in actions spontaneously without much thinking or reflection. When such actions are good and appraised, the action is categorised as "*akhlak terpuji*", meaning it is praised and accepted. On the other hand, when the action is bad and evil, it is categorised as "*akhlak terkeji*", meaning it is not accepted.

In most dictionaries, morals are defined as concerning or relating to

what is right and wrong in human behaviour. To analyse its meaning, morals relate to the principles of right and wrong in behaviour. There are some issues here because to be accepted in a certain society as moral, one needs to conform to a standard of behaviour. Thus, I always clarify morals and morality as subjective, except for universal values, such as honesty and respect, just to name a few. At times, morality can be conflicting as what is moral in country A could be condemned in country B. This is a notion not understood by many.

Such a complex theme for this year's Teachers Day should make us, the society of a multicultural nation, reflect on the heavy responsibility that the teaching profession has to shoulder towards the building of an intellectual and moral society. Not only do teachers have to build knowledge by educating students, whether in a formal or informal setting, based on their respective cognitive, emotional and social ability, they also have to develop the morals of their students. I refuse to use the word "perfect" because developing character is a lifelong process.

When I reflect on my own educational journey through primary and secondary school, I realise that most teachers were building knowledge and helping mould and develop my character into what is accepted in Malaysian culture. When I started becoming more ex-

posed to international experience, I realised that some moral attitudes need to be adapted according to the demographic. Thus, I started accepting morality as an active process of constructing understanding in relation to social interactions.

In the context of the school community, the values of teachers, parents and students are in constant dialogue with each other. In addition to their own personal values, teachers need to consider the ethical standards of their profession. In Malaysia, it is stated in the code

of ethics for the teaching profession that teachers have ethical responsibilities towards their students, the parents of their students, their colleagues and the community they serve.

To respond to the Teachers' Day theme and ethics of the teaching profession, a teacher must be able to perceive and interpret events in ways that lead to ethical action. Ethical sensitivity is closely related to a relatively new suggested intelligence type — social intelligence. Social intelligence is the ability to get along well with others and get them to cooperate with you. It is essential for teachers to be equipped with social intelligence so as to make the 2015 Teachers' Day theme a reality.

Keep up the good work, teachers. And a blessed Teachers' Day.

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