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## **Importance of religion and moral education**

BY DR. VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN - 28 NOVEMBER 2015 @ 11:00 AM

When I heard the news of a young bright individual, who was sitting for a centralised examination, had taken his own life, I did not pass judgment, blame anyone or make assumptions. I understood what he went through and I write this reflection based on my own life, as a child, a teenager, a teacher, a mother, a lecturer, a researcher, and most importantly, a human being.

Although I found the news disturbing, it made me reflect why suicide is on the rise, not just in Malaysia, but also around the globe. As a child growing up, I heard many stories about young couples in Cameron Highlands who drank “paraquat” and ended their lives because of a failed love. As an individual who underwent many challenges in life, I, too, had thoughts of suicide, even as a grown-up. Religious authorities may say you do not have enough faith in God.

Moral authorities may confirm that you do not value life. I beg to differ. We have to analyse the different concepts and environment in life. They include childhood and schooling, adolescence and peer pressure, adulthood and the meaning of life. As children develop in their family and neighbourhood, life is joyful and carefree. It was for me and many other children. Today, children have full days but the joy is missing.

Preschool preparations and other activities are created to mould the child. Parents say it’s all for the good of the child. But, what about the psychology and early development of the child? In most African countries and East Asian countries, a child has to be able to use his right hand and reach out to touch his left ear and vice versa. Then only can he be enrolled to go to school. Until then, they have fun playing and developing in their home environment. There must be a reason for doing so.

In Malaysia, children as young as two are enrolled in all kinds of activities even before they can develop physically. Then there are the pressure cooker days — study, study, study. In my previous articles, I have explained that not all children have the same cognitive ability.

Harvard Gardner speaks about multiple intelligence and the Malaysian education system has adapted some of his suggestions into mainstream education. Yet, at the end of the day, it is study, study, study and grades that matter. It was sad and frustrating for me as a secondary school teacher, who saw much potential in my students that were weak academically.

They had many abilities, except mental cognition, and today, that is the focus of our mainstream education system. This needs critical evaluation as we are burdening students and teachers with formative (school-based assessments), as well as summative or centralised assessments. Our adolescents in school are not even sure of what is becoming of them. Adolescence is a challenging period for many individuals. They have their own expectations and this is pressured by parents and society’s anticipation. So much pressure

is put upon oneself that suicide is seen as the final destination for some who are unable to take the pressure.

We speak so much about religion and morality. How can these two components help in the development of a child, an adolescent, a human being? I have been teaching and researching morality and religion for the past two decades. It is essential to bring both to the lives of adolescents. Worldwide we have seen how societies and nations are focused on universal values, global morality and the wellbeing of humans and nature. I see no faults in scriptures nor philosophical religions, as they all teach individuals to be better human beings.

I find universal values being more accepted by global societies, who feel religion is personal, and to live a harmonious life, values must be understood and applied in daily life. This brings us to the subject of moral education. Moral education should be understood and learnt by all as it's not just memorising values and definitions, it is about life. It is about facing daily moral dilemmas, making moral judgments, choosing the right alternative and living by the consequences of the choice made.

If the young lad who took his own life was given the appropriate knowledge and skills to face his own real-life dilemma with the support of religiosity, he might have thought of the consequences of his action. Every child and student should be provided with the opportunity to know themselves and their abilities.

At the end of the day, what counts is the humans we have become, while other aspects are secondary.

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