The Star

Grooming good kids

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Vishalache DESPITE

Moral Education (ME) recording the highest increase in performance among the six Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) 2023 core subjects, there is growing concern about the disconnect between students' academic performance in the subject and the application of the values learnt in their daily lives.

In the results announced last month, the ME subject average grade rose 0.2 points to 4.66, as compared with SPM 2022.

This, say experts, raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the current education system in fostering genuine moral development among the younger generation, and the broader implications for our nation.

Universiti Malaya (UM) Service Learning Malaysia-University for Society (Sulam) coordinator and Service Learning International initiator Assoc Prof Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan said rote learning in ME makes students good in exams but unable to apply the values learnt in their daily lives.

Vishalache, who is working with the Education Ministry's curriculum division to transform ME assessments to holistically evaluate students' moral development in school, said students are currently made to learn moral values the same way they are taught to learn languages, mathematics and science.

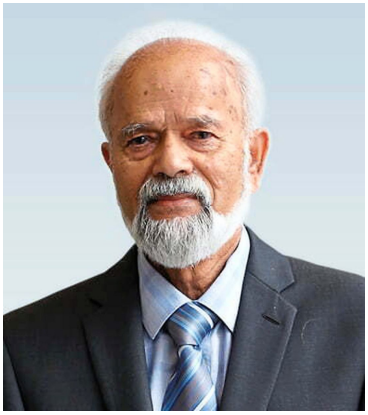
“The philosophy of teaching and learning ME in Malaysia, which focuses on teaching and assessing moral reasoning, emotions and action, is neither implemented nor assessed. It is unfortunate that students do not get a well-rounded ME in school,” she told StarEdu.

Times are changing and hopefully with more teachers being trained to teach ME, rote learning of moral values will be a thing of the past, the former UM Centre for Research in International and Comparative Education director said.

Simply teaching ME as a subject alone is not enough to influence moral behaviour, said educationist Tan Sri Dr T. Marimuthu.

The former UM professor of education, however, said, if moral values are taught through experiences that allow students to internalise them within the school culture, it can lead to the development of holistic individuals.

“ME focuses on how individuals develop their values and aspirations, which are shaped and passed on early in childhood.



Marimuthu

“If students are just memorising values to repeat them in an exam, the purpose of ME is defeated, as they will only aim to get an A,” he said, stressing that a student who gets an A in ME is not necessarily more morally righteous or ethical than one who gets a C.

A child learns values and discipline from their family, which is then reflected in their behaviour, he said, adding that this helps maintain social order in the community at large.

“Families are the fundamental building blocks of society, shaping individuals who then shape society.

“In my previous research, I found that despite Malaysia comprising many different ethnic groups, common values like ethics, good behaviour and charity are shared,” he said, adding that these culturally required behaviour are taught by families and cultivated in school.

Homegrown values

Sharing how a student had once told her, “If my parents do drugs, I will do drugs too”, Vishalache said although this was told to her when she was conducting her doctoral research in 2008, she remembered the encounter because it made her reflect on whether negative traits displayed by her sons had stemmed from her own actions as a parent.

Good behaviour, getting along with others, being charitable, and conflict resolution are all values learnt within the family, Marimuthu said, adding that without these values, students might behave like delinquents and have disciplinary problems.

He, however, said it would be wrong to generalise all young people with behavioural problems as lacking in moral values.

There are many factors, including family background, that could have influenced behaviour.

“Unfortunately, families in the lower-income group often have larger, overcrowded households, which may affect how the children are raised,” he said.



Sawittri

In contrast, middle-class families, for instance, tend to have more loving interactions, with children being rewarded rather than punished to teach them life lessons. And in other families, the parenting style might be authoritarian so when the children grow up, they develop different sets of values, he added.

He said school rules and administration, coupled with the behaviour of educators during the process of teaching and learning and the handling of disciplinary problems, can also impact a student's morality.

School support

The school serves as a moral training ground where students learn values that help them become responsible members of society, steering clear of criminal paths and contributing positively to their communities, said Marimuthu.

Teach For Malaysia (TFM) Fellowship interim head Sawittri Charun said teachers, next to parents and family, are the closest adults to students and naturally have a significant influence on them.

"Adults should always demonstrate good moral behaviour, especially now that they often interact with students on social media.

"What teachers do and how teachers carry themselves in public virtual spaces are also observed by their students," she said adding that teachers should be intentional about helping students practise good values.It starts by inviting students to discuss the values they feel are important. Only then can you get their "buy-in", she said.

Teachers, she said, should also create platforms for students to discuss the values that drive their behaviour.

"For example, students can share how they are upholding values in class," she suggested.

National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Fouzi Singon said in school, morality is taught theoretically and tested, but real practice happens within family culture.

A mere 180 minutes of weekly ME study is not enough to instill these values, he said.

“Modern parenting, often lenient from the early years, contributes to a decline in morals. When children grow into teenagers and lack these values, it is hard for parents to intervene effectively.



Fouzi

“Teachers, nonetheless, can step in by modelling and nurturing moral behaviour, complementing family efforts,” he said, adding that this includes respecting and empathising with students, colleagues and parents through active listening and thoughtful actions like helping or offering words of kindness to struggling students and taking them under their wing.

Agreeing, Vishalache said teachers are key role models in schools where their words, actions and treatment of others are closely observed by their students.

“The saying ‘values are caught and not taught’ should be remembered by every teacher regardless of what subject they are teaching.

“Even if they were going through challenging times, students would emulate teachers who portray compassion, fairness, justice and positivity,” she said.

Crediting her own teachers as being excellent role models, Vishalache said she still keeps in touch with them to show her appreciation.

“They have moulded me to be who I am today.

“Their good moral behaviour helped me practise the same values in my life.

“A life without good character and morals is like a person without a strong personality, easily swayed by the opinions of others,” she said, adding that it takes a village to educate a child. She said in teaching moral values, one must always start with the basics like cleanliness, compassion, self-respect, respect for others, responsibility, honesty and truthfulness in young children right from preschool level.

As young children grow into young adults, however, teaching methods become more complex, and must involve value analysis, values clarification, and active learning of the ME subject.

“It is only through the exploration of good morals that students would excel in the exams and truly embody the ME philosophy,” she opined.

Experiential learning

Citing her doctoral research findings, Vishalache said secondary school students were very attracted to learning the subject if real-life moral dilemmas faced by them and their peers were incorporated in the lessons.

“My research was about teaching ME by dealing with relationships and the ways to resolve conflicts that arise.

“The students took the research seriously as it helped them to deal with moral dilemmas about themselves, their peers, their families and those around them,” she said, adding that teachers who draw on the experience of students when teaching ME can enhance the teaching and learning of the subject.

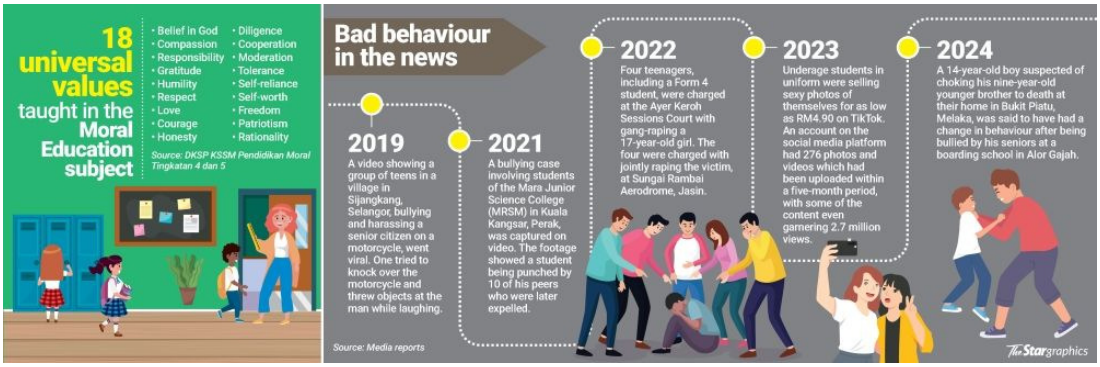
“It’s clear that simply using textbooks or discussing values isn’t enough to produce students with high morals,” she said, noting that while the Education Ministry has instructed all ME teachers to teach 64 hours inside and 32 hours outside the classroom, which aligns with the ME philosophy, the content and values in the syllabus are still being delivered without considering the possibility of discussing contradictory issues and conflicts.

“I once had students discuss moral issues like river cleanliness. One group got emotionally upset because in their culture, the river is sacred and should not be a place for littering. The other students just did not care about the issue.

“Solutions on how to deal with such contradictory views and opinions have not been spelt out in the ME syllabus, and the feelings and opinions of students are hardly considered,” she lamented.

Depending on how it is taught, Marimuthu said ME can be an exciting subject, as it explores the different value systems in different ethnic groups as well as the common ones.

“If students embark on projects like interviewing underprivileged people, they might understand their suffering and develop compassion.“This is an example of how values can be caught through experiences,” he said.



Vishalache said the first ME syllabus covered 16 core values and 64 sub-values, which were then reduced to 36 in the year 2000 when the syllabus was revised.In 2018, she said, the Standard Secondary School Curriculum (KSSM) ME syllabus was further revamped and it now consists of 18 universal values (see infographic).“Hopefully, the values can be reduced further by the year 2027 when the curriculum goes through another revamp,” she said, adding that ME is a dynamic subject that, unlike religion which teaches right and wrong, instils values in children, helping them learn to reason and make moral decisions as they grow.

While religion teaches students to see life in black and white, ME guides them through the grey issues in life, she added.

“The ME syllabus should not overly focus on exams and grades. The latest methods, such as design thinking, systemic reasoning, and making moral judgements, provide students the opportunity to practise good morals.

“Even with the best curriculum and assessments, we will fail to truly impart the ME philosophy to students without proper training for our teacher trainers and their charges,” she said.

Bad behaviour in the news 2019A video showing a group of teens in a village in Sijangkang, Selangor, bullying and harassing a senior citizen on a motorcycle, went viral. One tried to knock over the motorcycle and threw objects at the man while laughing.

2021A bullying case involving students of the Mara Junior Science College (MRSM) in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, was captured on video. The footage showed a student being punched by 10 of his peers who were later expelled.

2022Four teenagers, including a Form 4 student, were charged at the Ayer Keroh Sessions Court with gang-raping a 17-year-old girl. The four were charged with jointly raping the victim, at Sungai Rambai Aerodrome, Jasin.

2023 Underage students in uniform were selling sexy photos of themselves for as low as RM4.90 on TikTok. An account on the social media platform had 276 photos and videos which had been uploaded within a five-month period, with some of the content even garnering 2.7 million views.

2024A 14-year-old boy suspected of choking his nine-year-old younger brother to death at their home in Bukit Piatu, Melaka, was said to have had a change in behaviour after being bullied by his seniors at a boarding school in Alor Gajah.

Source: Media reports

Living with value

“Schools play an important role in building the morality of society since a good portion of our lives is spent there. That said, I don’t think moral values should be reduced to just conforming to a particular code of conduct or behaving in a certain way just because our parents and teachers say it’s good.

Moral classes should serve as a platform to educate students on how to stand on their own two feet and to use their own judgement to differentiate between right and wrong. In secondary school, we were taught during camps to wash our own plates and utensils after using them.

Although it seemed like a small task at first, the culture and the quality of independence that we built throughout those five years have remained with us to this day."

Jeremy Nathan, 21
"It's crucial to apply the moral values we learn into our daily lives as these are the fundamentals of being human. When I was eight, I learnt about gratefulness in class.

My textbook had a picture of a child saying, 'Mum and dad, let's eat!' in Mandarin.

It just stuck with me and when dinnertime came, I made sure to thank my parents for the meal before tucking in. My parents were greatly moved. I'll never forget this experience because it taught me the importance of gratitude and cherishing what I have. Sometimes, all our parents want is to feel appreciated."

Tiffany Cheong, 16
"I remember being taught about responsibility in primary school. I loved 'classroom jobs' so it resonated with me. Even now, I try my best to embody that value, though I sometimes struggle. I recently went to a hospital with my family to help them, although I was in the midst of my IGCSE revision.

I put my past-year papers down and reminded myself that as the eldest child in the family, I have responsibilities to shoulder. So I helped with the paperwork, carried my disabled brother onto the medical bed, and later pushed his stroller. It eased my family's burden and I felt a sense of accomplishment. Indeed, the values we learn in moral classes are essential.

They shape us and help us live better daily lives."

Wong Eu Kenn, 17