

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**

In search of balanced individuals


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HEALTH experts have warned Malaysia of declining mental health among adolescents in the country.

Deputy director-general of health Dr Lokman Hakim Sulaiman reaffirmed that the National Health Survey, which is carried out every decade, showed that mental issues among children and adolescents aged between 5 and 15 years had increased from 13 per cent in 1996 to 20.3 per cent in 2011.

Based on the 2012 Global School-based Students Health Survey, 7.9 per cent of Malaysian students admitted considering suicide and 6.7 per cent of them had attempted suicide at least once.

This trend is indeed worrying as we approach 2020 when adolescents are expected to play a crucial societal role.

The 2012 Malaysian National Suicide Registry recorded 1.3 deaths by suicide for every 100,000 people.

Although this ratio is much lower compared to countries such as Hong Kong, Korea and Japan, many academics and civil societies believe that the actual figure is much higher due to under-reporting for various reasons. Seven peo-

ple kill themselves daily, with young adults making up the majority according to the Malaysian Psychiatric Association.

So it is not surprising to read lately of an upper six student, aged 19, plunging to his death from the 19th floor of a building in Penang. He had been reportedly seeking psychiatric help.

According to police investigation, he was a bright student who was to sit Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia this year. However, he had been suffering from "depression after a drop in academic performance".

This is certainly neither the first nor the last incident, as far as suicide due to undue academic stress is concerned. It is a universal concern especially in countries hailed as successful in their education, notably in the Far East. South Korea and Japan (followed by Hong Kong and Singapore) are infamous for academic stress-related suicides.

But few governments and international "ranking" organisations pay attention to this issue, preferring to gloss over it, and focus on "global ranking" as a hallmark of so-called unqualified success.

In the 2015 World Education Forum hosted by South Korea in Incheon, these contradictions were made apparent when students' organisations and civil society voiced their concern publicly.

While the Education Ministry exhibitions extolled the high achievements in education in South Korea at the Convention Centre, the 2015 World Education Forum Street Exhibition was held along the streets



A banner along a street leading to the venue of the forum in Incheon.

leading to the venue.

A banner highlighted the issues of ranking, discrimination and commercialisation while another drew attention to Youth Apprenticeship: Education as Exploitation?

A cursory observation led to the conclusion that all is not well. When queried, most told a story of undue academic pressure in their lives as adolescents. South Korean children and adolescents are the least happy among developed countries, according to a survey conducted by South Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare last year. "The most relevant factor to the children's life satisfaction is academic stress, followed by school violence, Internet addiction, negligence and cyber violence" said the ministry.

According to National Statistics Korea, more than half of children

aged between 15 and 19 polled admitted to having suicidal thoughts due to academic performance and college entrance exams. South Korea ranked last in the survey's child deprivation index, which includes the lack of leisure time for hobbies and club activities.

Overall statistics from the World Health Organisation indicate that there is one suicide every 40 seconds. Yet, we are more preoccupied with extremism and wars, neglecting the number of lives lost through suicide said to exceed the number of deaths due to homicide, terrorist acts and war combined. We need to urgently "moderate" the current seemingly "extreme" systems of education that have "induced" suicide among the young and innocent.

Granted that there is no simple method to address this, but it is relatively easier to handle if ap-

propriate resources and attention are invested.

Dr Lokman said adolescents who have positive relationship with their families as well as those with spiritual belief are less likely to have suicidal tendencies.

While ethics and spirituality is one of the six student aspirations identified in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, it must be comprehensively acted on within the context of the National Education Philosophy to nurture balanced and harmonic individuals — and not merely human capital as it is so often misdirected and emphasised.

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