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Our education system must give proper place to ethics

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Of late, people from all walks of life have expressed their thoughts about the dire need for ethics in all aspects of life.

In line with our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent call (NST, July 11) for new subjects to replace traditional ones so that they remain relevant in our education system, I hope the current move to revamp the system will accord ethics its appropriate place in the 21st century ...

Humanitarian and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer wrote that the underlying cause for the severe crises of 20th century civilisation is the lack of true ethics.

The only way out of our current nadir of morality is to utilise education to "bring more ethics into the world".

Schweitzer goes on to postulate that our age must achieve spiritual renewal.

It can do so in only one way: the people must reflect on the nature of true goodness.

The continual barrage of unethical behaviour by people in responsible positions certainly suggests that we are ethically apathetic and negligent.

It is indeed alarming that persons who hold key positions in business, law, government, military, education, politics, and religion are bright, competent, efficient and articulate, but ethically lax.

Recent examples range from misuse of power, authority and public funds to blackmail and corruption.

It is equally alarming that large numbers of our citizens are:

- \* Relatively undisturbed by the apparent wrongdoings of people in positions of power;

- \* Shell-shocked by the numerous and flagrant unethical actions of otherwise respected persons; and

- \* Confused and bewildered by the questionable behaviour of these trusted leaders.

While all the factors contributing to the current wave of unethical actions are difficult to identify, in my judgment, it is the conspicuous absence of the study of ethics in the education curricula that is, at least, partially responsible for such occurrences.

For some time now, contemporary writers, teachers, preachers and critics at large have been urging that our education system give careful attention to the study of right conduct.

The schools should be helping children to look within themselves, and from this self-knowledge derive a set of values.

Values per se are not adequately taught in our schools today.

It is neither wise nor practical to remain ethically illiterate just as it is neither wise nor practical to remain scientifically and IT illiterate.

Just as studies have developed around ethnic relations and environmental literacy, education must necessarily include a meaningful study of ethics, to investigate right or "acceptable human conduct" and what is ultimately good or desirable for people.

Although the definition of acceptable conduct varies between countries, the core ethical values - respect, trustworthiness, justice and fairness, caring, responsibility, civic virtue and citizenship - transcend

geographical and cultural barriers.

The study and practice of ethics is not only necessary for survival but also for achieving the spiritual life which is part of the human essence.

In short, full humanity cannot be achieved unless a culture and its institutions encourage goodness.

The essence of goodness here means the ability to practise functional honesty, empathy, unselfishness, and love towards our fellow human beings.

So it behoves the education system to do what is within its power to provide its learners with knowledge concerning ethics and with opportunities to apply such knowledge.

Indeed, an education system which ignores the responsibility of instructing its youths in ethics is not only self-defeating but also life-negating.

Not only would the study of ethics help our youths to arrive at what constitutes good conduct, it would also offer them knowledge of general philosophy, history, economics, and political science.

It would enable them to better interpret such disciplines from different perspectives while they are introduced to theology, psychology, sociology, and even law.

The spectrum of general knowledge to be encountered in the study of ethics would be very broad yet quite integrated.

In the process of revamping our education system, which is geared towards creating a society of "thinking and knowledge students" under the smart school concept, let our students at all levels be taught to be ethical as well as to be innovative, creative, and analytical.

The current move to revamp our education system is timely, desirable and commendable.

It should be pursued vigorously so that we can avoid the path taken by traditional education which has pushed ethics almost completely aside.

Otherwise, the education system must continue to accept much of the blame for the present moral slump.