

Making the grade

HUGE BLOW: This year's UPSR results saw 4,896 pupils or 1.11 per cent of the 440,782 candidates scoring straight As, far fewer than the previous year. Many parents have asked for the papers to be rechecked, but experts believe it's time to redefine success and stop placing too much emphasis on scores, writes Audrey Vijaindren

DEVASTATION, anger, disappointment and a blow to their self-esteem are only some of the emotions many 12-year-olds felt when they received their UPSR results recently. After a year of extra classes and tuition sessions, many are still feeling the pain of scoring fewer As than expected.

If children are taught to measure their self-worth by their exam results, performing below expectation academically can lead to feelings of shame, hopelessness, inferiority, and even self-hatred, warns Rekindle Therapy counselling psychologist Cathie Wu.

She says depression and anxiety may result if these struggles are long-term.

"We are gradually moving away from an obsessed, fixated view on academic excellence due to increasing exposure to

cess solely by external factors, such as power, fame, wealth and influence, or perceive it as a summation of external and internal elements.

"I like to see personal success less as an end goal but more as a development in the pursuit of personal satisfaction, achievement and purpose.

"It can be a good opportunity to have a mutual dialogue about what these results mean and do not mean;

to seek to understand what factors may have contributed to sub-par results; how to cope with disappointment without denigrating the self; and how to continue to commit to the learning process."

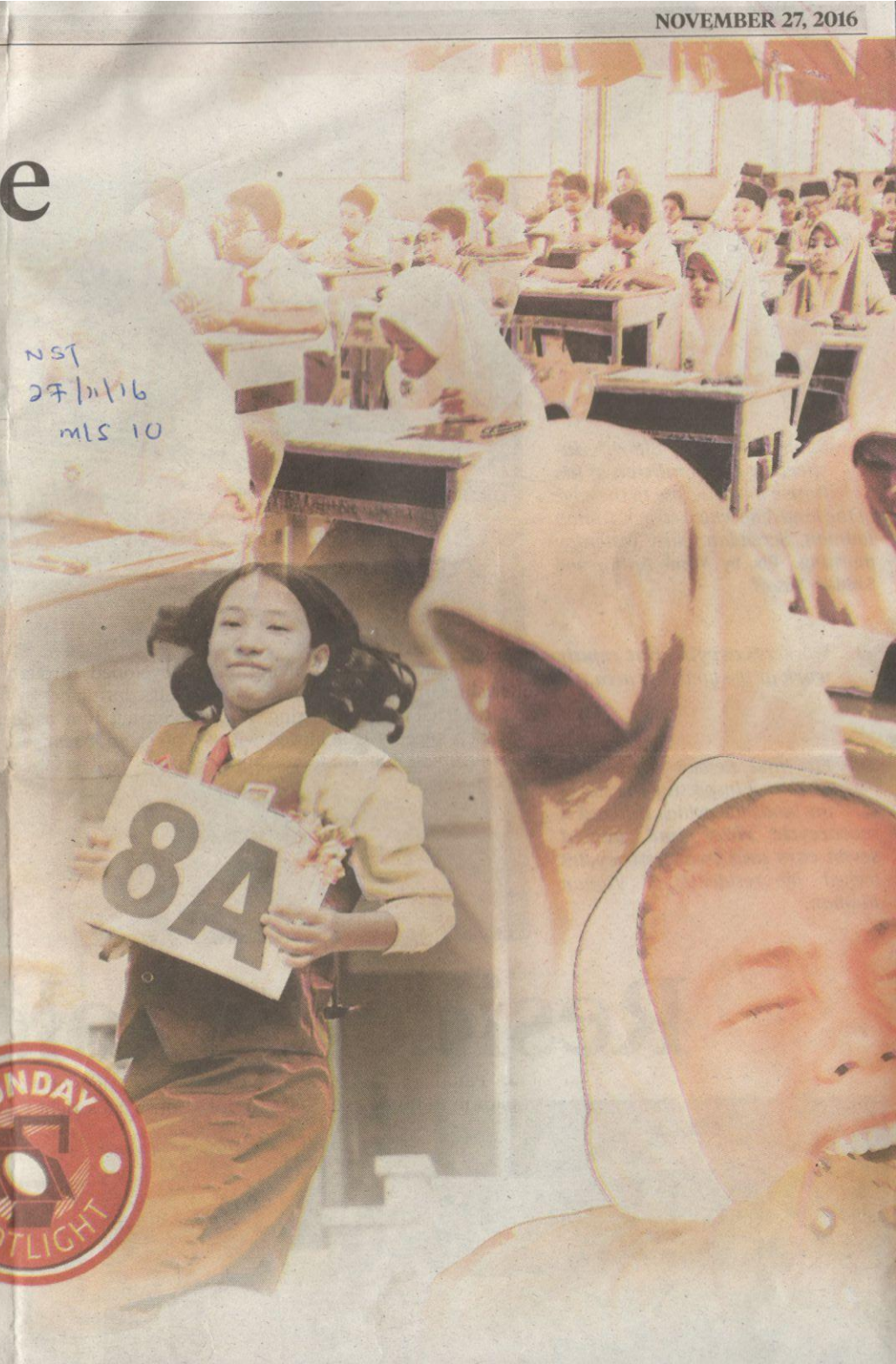
We should pay attention to the continuing process of teaching and supporting these values in the family rather than a "crisis intervention" talk following an under-

This is a delicate issue and if wrongly handled could lead to many adverse consequences such as performances getting even worse, alienation of the child from their parents, resorting to drugs, even leading to suicide in many instances.

Dr Michael Heah



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diverse occupation-
al choices and success stories not
traditionally founded on academic
performance.

"However, traditional Asian edu-
cation values are deeply rooted.
Therefore much importance contin-
ues to be placed on academic excel-
lence as a requisite to prestigious
careers," she adds.

But, if children can be encouraged
to develop mindsets and attitudes
with resilience, tenacity and good
work ethics, they will learn not to
give up easily despite failure and will
continue to strive to improve them-
selves.

Wu says one can determine suc-



Cathie
Wu

sirable perfor-
mance, Wu adds.

Dr Anasuya Jegathevi Jegathesan,
licensed counsellor and academic
head of the Masters in Counselling
Programme at HELP University says
while it may be bad for straight A
students to get Bs and Cs, what
about the majority of average stu-
dents who are used to getting solid
Bs, a couple of As and a C?

"Out of the blue they are for the
first time in a government exam,
faced with far lower grades. Average
students who have studied, as hard
as they could, and were comfortable
with being average are suddenly fail-
ures. Forget academic performance,
how does being a 'failure' impact
anyone? Really badly.

"Most students probably did not
expect bad results. They're left to
deal with reactions such as: 'What?
How could you fail? I thought you
studied!'. How will a 12-year-old re-
cover from that quick and deep cut?
All the reasoning that comes later for
some of the kids will not treat the
wound because their self-esteem has
already been damaged," she adds.

Anasuya says we should be adopt-
ing systems that look at a child's
development and not marks and
memorisation.

"But the change has to start with
the idea of what education and

learning is. It is not the memorising
and vomiting of facts, rather it is the
development of children into active
human beings — something that we
have failed at."

How do we rise above this? Ana-
suya offers a three-step action plan.

"Firstly, we make sure we do not
punish children for the system's fail-
ure — expectations and demands for
marks as children grow have to be
shifted so that unfair com-
parisons are not made. Do
not compare your children
to anyone else, each hu-
man is unique and differ-
ent — value the differ-
ences.

"Secondly, love your
children. Talk to them
about things other than
studies, family problems
and issues. Talk to children
about what they are inter-
ested in. If kids can talk to
you about unimportant
things like Pokemon Go, the really
nice chocolate cake and the butterfly
they saw in class, as they grow up
they may be able to talk to you about
important things. If they are not
willing to talk to you, you have to
initiate the conversation. Tell your
kids about interesting things in your
day, about work and life, model the

openness that you would like them
to have with you.

"Finally, discuss your own fail-
ures, and give examples of those
who have failed and risen above it.
Make sure you manage your own
sense of failure. Parents need to be
okay with the situation first before
they can help their child be okay."

Chief executive officer of Corpo-
rate Coach Academy and Interna-
tional Coach Federation
(ICF) Master Certified
Coach Dr Michael Heah
echoes her opinion.

He notes that Malaysians
are still obsessed with aca-
demic excellence, especial-
ly the middle and upper
class members of society.

"Many of them send their
children to private schools,
even to international
schools and an overseas edu-
cation after that.

"This puts a lot of pres-
sure on the child, but more so on
parents who in turn 'pass' it down to
their children. They inevitably be-
come the real 'victims' of this sys-
tem."

Heah reminds parents that failure
is not always a bad thing, but a time
to make a total re-assessment of the
educational plan and strategy for the



Dr Anasuya
Jegathevi
Jegathesan

child. "Parents need to know that
there are nine types of intelligence
— natural intelligence, musical in-
telligence, linguistic intelligence,
spatial intelligence, emotional intel-
ligence, intrapersonal intelligence,
bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, exis-
tential intelligence and logical-
mathematical intelligence. Any of
these types, if it fits with the child's
special skill, can also lead to the
child's success."

He says the root causes of a "bad
performance" should be identified
first before speaking to the child.

"Often the child may not like what
they are learning, it may not be an
issue of poor discipline. Taken from
this perspective, the conversation
should centre around finding the
best fit for the child rather than
warning them to buck up.

"This is a delicate issue and if
wrongly handled could lead to many
adverse consequences such as per-
formances getting even worse, alien-
ation of the child from their parents,
resorting to drugs, even leading to
suicide in many instances."

Seeing a career coach or doing a
psychometric assessment will help
parents plan smartly and strategi-
cally for the child's future where he
achieves both success and fulfil-
ment, Heah adds.

Is success measured by the number of As?

"SUCCESS" and "fulfilment" are two separate things which should not be confused, says chief executive officer of Corporate Coach Academy and International Coach Federation (ICF) Master Certified Coach Dr Michael Heah.

"In a strict sense, success is extrinsic or tangibly driven, such as the number of As, a big house, a good paying job, money in the bank, meeting a target and so forth. It is short-lasting and after a while the glamour will die off.

"On the other hand, fulfilment is intrinsic and intangible; being able to live one's dream or passion, living out our values, making a difference and so forth. That is longer-lasting.

"When success is achieved without fulfilment, it becomes an empty success, leading to frustration and disillusionment."

Heah stresses that, from the standpoint of education, this can happen when parents push their children to become "scholars" although it is clear that they are not into this but prefer something like a

vocational type of achievement where the "hands" are used rather than the "brain".

ICF certified life coach David Tan agrees.

"Academic results only look at the outer strength of basic knowledge. We also need to start focusing on mental strength, in terms of how good children are at building relationships and keeping to a given assignment.

"Successful people will tell you that they overcame struggles by having the patience to wait for the right time and the right opportunities. Their success was

developed through discipline and self-control, not by rash decisions or slipping into a deep sense of depression because of a single setback."

He advises students who have faced setbacks to focus on the next step and move forward.

"If they did badly in Mathematics, focus on improving that or get a tutor. Essentially, it's about understanding your weaknesses and working on them instead of letting a small

setback overwhelm you. It's learning to persevere in the face of adversity.

"You are in Standard Six. It's not the end of the world. Many famous people were not successful in their early years."

Tan adds that parents have the biggest role to play in helping their children deal with disappointment.

"Parents should be cognisant of how much or little they are contributing to their child's growth. A large part of helping them is about spending time with their children and sharing with them life lessons that they themselves have learnt. After all, that's how wisdom is passed down throughout the generations. Parents need to develop themselves too because they are a part of their child's success or failure."

Children who are trying to pick themselves up from where they are now need to be diligent and hardworking, he says.

"These are two different things — being hardworking is like chopping wood for two hours instead of twenty minutes, while being diligent is going the extra mile by keeping the axe sharpened, oiled and ready for use at all times. Diligence is the con-

sistent following up and ensuring it cuts deep and efficiently.

"Children must also learn to have faith in themselves and understand themselves. Faith brings confidence, and the ability to accomplish much. A measure of self-faith will enable a child to overcome a lot. Management books don't tell you that. They can't measure it; and you won't find this in schoolbooks. They can't teach this singularly."

The ultimate lesson, he adds, is to learn how to allow failure to guide you back to the path of success because if you learn that early on in life, you won't get depressed later on because failure could be right around the corner for anyone.

"This is life and parents should take advantage of these failures. Don't say, 'you are a failure'. Instead teach them to pick themselves up. If this is a situation at Standard Six, I see this as a fantastic opportunity to learn about success."

David Tan



Dr Michael Heah

Parents have their say...

1. "Parents who already have a set path in mind for their kid's future, which includes securing a place in an Oxbridge type of institution, would definitely be obsessed with their child's academic excellence.

"However, there are new age parents as well who believe in more creative methods of teaching, which place more emphasis on arts, music, invention and the freedom to decide on one's own career path, and are probably less obsessed with academic excellence.

"Personally, as long as a child

shows signs of maturity in deciding on what's right or wrong, has the ability to understand, the logic that supports a certain action and is a good human being. There shouldn't even be a conversation about bad performance in my opinion.

"A child, just like us adults, needs continuous support and encouragement to grow and achieve greater heights especially in moments of "poor performance". This can be done by using words of encouragement and examples of suc-

cessful people who rose above their failures in life only to achieve greater heights," says Kay S., mother of one.

2. "A person with high emotional quotient (EQ), such as good attitude can go further as they are logical, level-headed, and able to learn, adapt and apply. To achieve this, they must be exposed to work related activities involving public speaking, socialising, team building, and leadership tasks in an encouraging and fun way, and it must

be mandatory. They must be guided by experienced teachers who will see to their success. Parents should use a "bad performance" as an opportunity to talk to their kids about rising up from the bottom and persevering. And encourage them not to give up but try again.

"When it comes to what is presumed as failure, let them know their weaknesses and get them to make an effort to work harder around their weaknesses by motivating them," says Soon Kheng Im, mother of two.



The emphasis on exam results is placing too much stress on students.

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