



Sunday August 15, 2010

Some teachers are not angels

I REFER to the letter by the Corporate Communication Unit of the Education Ministry in response to a reader who warned that teachers may hold too much power if exams are abolished.

As a teacher for about 30 years, I am tickled and yet disappointed by the optimistic but rather naïve reply.

The argument offered by the Corporate Communication Unit is that “good values and integrity have been adopted in the teaching training programmes at the Institute of Teacher Education” and that “in schools teachers are reminded to adhere to values and ethics of public servants in carrying out their daily tasks and duties”.

Hence, “the practice of moral values free of corruption, malpractice and abuse of power are strengthened and continued in the work of a teacher.”

To put it simply, the ministry believes that teachers are perfect beings who have been programmed to behave in the way they are supposed to.

Mind you, not only teachers, as the letter went on to include all civil servants: “A public servant is always reminded to comply with the procedures and guidelines of conduct and acceptance of gifts in the public service as stipulated in the *Pekeliling Perhidmatan Bilangan 3, 1998*.”

However, it would be naïve to think that just because such a directive has been issued, it will effectively wipe out corrupt practices in the public service. Does it mean we can now boast of an incorruptible civil service?

Coming back to the classroom, the teacher is literally the king or queen wielding great power. The teacher can make life miserable for the pupils if he or she wants to. In fact many pupils, especially the monitors, are exploited by their teachers.

They carry out tasks which are supposed to be done by the teachers themselves, such as filling in marks in reports cards, marking the attendance in the register and closing the register at the end of each month, tabulating data required by the Education Department, and even marking objective test papers.

Instead of teaching, some teachers just get the monitor or someone with good handwriting to write copious notes on the board for the class to copy. Clearly, such teachers have already abused their power. I dread to think what would happen if more power is vested in them.

I have also known teachers who give lucrative tuition to their own pupils and even give tips so that they can do well in their school tests and annual examinations. Besides, if the answers required are subjective in nature, what is to prevent the teacher from being more generous in awarding marks to selected pupils?

With the implementation of the key performance index (KPI), wouldn't every teacher want to make himself or herself look good by being more generous with marks? It is also not uncommon for pupils to beg for a few more marks in order to pass or to get better grades.

Pupils will think of all sorts of ways to please their teachers. Although the bribe may not be money, there are many ways pupils and parents can "reward" teachers, especially now that teachers are allowed to be active in politics.

It is certainly wishful thinking for the ministry to hold the view that there is no compromise in teaching methods and ethics if school-based exams replace public exams. Having been in the teaching profession for about three decades, I wish I could agree.

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