

# The teacher's voice

## Reflections of a Malaysian schoolteacher



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In this paper, I share my thoughts as a teacher in the form of conscious and spontaneous reflections that have guided my actions and decisions on my professional journey for more than two decades.

I will begin with a typical scenario when the results of the public examinations are released. Students who obtain straight As will be feted by all parties and will be glorified. As a teacher, I feel happy but not elated when students excel and their hard work has paid off. Is it because in another corner of the hall, there are students crying their hearts out as they did not excel as expected and no amount of consoling can make them get rid of the notion that they are failures at such a young age? Well, are they really failures in an exam-oriented system or have we, the educators, society and the system failed them? We might also have failed to inculcate in them the elements of emotional intelligence, which would have equipped them with the ability to handle their emotions. As an educator, it grieves me that many a time we fail to see beyond the slip of paper and tend to predict our children's future success based on their present examination results.

Teachers would also be poring over the results to analyse them and prepare post-mortem reports. The question that would be uppermost in their mind would be whether their subject had recorded a quantum leap or a decline in grades. The teachers would then review whether the strategies, activities and programmes they had employed had borne fruit or need to be changed. They would compare notes with other teachers and try to come up with novel strategies so that test scores continue to increase. Otherwise, if the results plummet, the teacher's credibility is at stake. Parents and stakeholders would also be interested parties and their opinion of the school would be mostly dependent on the academic achievement of the school in the public examinations. Apparently, excellent schools and excellent teachers are equated with excellent academic achievement in the public examinations. As a result, teachers tend to drill their students to pass exams and teach for the test so they improve in their test-taking skills. In my opinion, the overemphasis on examination results as a measurement of success undermines the learning process and this does not augur well for our society in the long term. If we value the holistic development of our children, then we have to downplay our obsession with the results of the public examinations. I concur with Chiam Heng Keng in her book, *Understanding Children*<sup>1</sup> (1995), that parents and teachers have the tendency to coerce children to perceive the world from the adults' perspective, criticise their ideas, curb their fantasy and imagination and evaluate their success or failure according to adults'

perceptions and standards. As a teacher I have always impressed upon my students that the most important 'A' they must hold on to is the 'A' for Attitude. I believe we should reduce the emphasis of the 'A' in exams and highlight the 'A' in Attitude. Then, parents and society at large would not have to fret about the performance of students.

Other interested parties that have a vested interest in examinations are the tuition centres and tutors. With parents obsessed with feeding their children a daily diet of tuition, is it any wonder that tuition centres continue to proliferate in every nook and cranny? Parents feel that by attending tuition, their children will obtain better paper qualifications that will enable them to gain admission into better schools, Ivy League universities and so forth. The irony of it is that sometimes when students excel in the public examinations, the tutor will be the toast of the town and the subject teacher in school will not be given the credit. However, when the student fails to excel, then the schoolteacher is to blame. I have often asked myself this question: If my role is to produce students who obtain as many As as possible, what is the difference between the tutor and me? Both the private tutor and the teacher in school might be the toast of the nation for being extremely good at teaching for the test and making students pass well and obtain straight As. Well, as for me, my role is not only to teach but more than that – I wish to educate children. As an educator, I stretch their minds to think out of the box, touch their hearts and teach them to manage and handle their emotions, and make them worthy human beings who will eventually be able to make their mark at the workplace and become assets to the nation.

In our quest to produce students who obtain the best, do we sideline the rest? During classroom assessments, we are encouraged to tailor the tests to cater for the needs and abilities of our students. We test them on what we have taught and they manage to pass the tests and feel motivated. Subsequently, when standardised tests or examinations are set that are norm-referenced, the same set of students do not do as well. Many of these students are not academically inclined but are more inclined towards vocational skills. Since the number of places in technical schools is limited, these disengaged students stay on at school with no interest shown towards their studies and struggle academically. Here, we tend to subscribe to the view that 'one size fits all' and thus we tend to assess our students according to that yardstick. In order to get more students to pass, we force them to spend more time on what they are not good at to the extent that they end up being mediocre in what they were initially good at. In regular schools, when we have more than 40 students in a classroom, then



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catering for the needs and interests of each child becomes a challenge. Ideally, we know that these children listen to a different drummer and they should be given the latitude to develop at their own pace. If we want every student in our class to feel like a winner, then we should reduce the weight placed on the final examination. The adage ‘every child matters’ should guide us to look into other forms of alternative assessment, such as portfolio assessment and projects to gauge our students’ progress. By doing so, we would be taking into account the different learning styles of our students, their incremental progress and cumulative achievement over a period of time.

Some of our students who do not complete their secondary education end up working as mechanics, tailors or salesmen. When you teach in a small town, you will surely meet those students. One of my significant moments happened when I wanted to purchase some electrical goods. My former student who was giving me tips on certain items remarked: ‘Once you taught me, now I’m teaching you.’ Our roles had changed and he who had been a school dropout, who society had once deemed a failure, was now my ‘teacher’, somebody who was more knowledgeable and experienced in an area that I had only book knowledge of. These students who once failed miserably academically are now doing well kinesthetically.

When schools decide on which teachers to teach examination classes, they usually give priority to those who are examiners,

experienced and are able to produce results. Once I was asked by one of my administrators whether I had experience teaching Form 5 (equivalent to GCSE-level) classes. She went on to state that she was looking for the best teacher to teach the students. This statement shook the core of my belief. I told her that the best teachers should teach the primary and lower secondary levels. This is because a teacher who is experienced and passionate about teaching would be able to work wonders with children at a very young age. A strong foundation that is laid down at such an age is half the battle won. I have found secondary school students who have difficulty unlearning what they have wrongly learned in primary school. It is as if the subject matter has become fossilised and embedded in their whole system. When a teacher is able to create genuine interest in a subject at the formative age, students can become autonomous learners and be able to seek knowledge on their own later on. Thus the teacher plays an important role as a guide at their side.

This belief of mine was further reinforced when I did school-based research in a primary school. Being a secondary school teacher, I had requested to do my research in a primary school, as I knew that I would never get such an opportunity again in my teaching career. My research was conducted in a Year 4 (10 year-olds) class where the pupils were considered weak. I did a pre-test followed by an intervention and then a post-test was carried out. I created my own visual mnemonics to teach the spelling of irregular plural

nouns. At the same time, I encouraged the pupils to come up with their own mnemonics. These children who are considered failures in our exam-oriented system were able to produce original and creative pieces of work, which is a testament to the fact that every child has potential and it is up to the teacher to unleash that potential. That was one of my defining moments as a teacher. It had nothing to do with pupils excelling in the exams but in allowing the child's innate potential to be showcased and his voice to be heard. As educators we must always bear in mind that if the child cannot learn in the way we teach, we must teach him in the way he can learn.

When I analysed the test results, I found that many of them had obtained very high scores compared to the pre-test results. For me, these students were in the category of 'zero to hero'. When I asked the students what reward they wanted, two of them said: 'Don't go back to secondary school. Come back and teach us.' This remark left me astounded as I expected them to ask for some tangible gifts such as chocolates or toys. I believe that kindergarten and primary school teachers who teach with passion and dedication will definitely be able to spark an interest in the learners and make a real difference in the lives of these children who will eventually turn out to be winners in life.

Teachers who have postgraduate qualifications are usually expected to teach upper secondary classes. Those who believe that the foundation is extremely important are more often than not labelled as shirkers of responsibility who are unwilling to take up the challenge of teaching examination classes. In the past when I had requested to teach lower secondary students, my colleagues and administrators would reply that I was wasting my talents and expertise. I would have no issues if this viewpoint was expounded by a layman, but coming from educated colleagues was something I could not accept. Such teachers should change their mindset and realise that non-examination classes are just as important as examination ones. My own personal experience teaching the weakest of the weak students made me a more creative teacher. There were times I could not adopt or adapt the methodologies suggested by experts. By teaching in such a challenging situation, I realised that in order to make learning engaging and meaningful I had to try out my own methods. This gave me the confidence I needed to experiment and explore uncharted territories. I was not doing a favour to my students by teaching them. And yet, I was fortunate to have been given the opportunity to teach them, as it made me come up with some original teaching activities.

In our education system, teachers in government service rarely get the opportunity to visit schools in other countries including the Commonwealth. In my opinion, it would be beneficial for teachers to share their best practices and see for themselves how schools work in other places. This would broaden their horizons and make them better educators. Experienced teachers who serve the grassroots should be invited by teacher training institutes and education faculties to share their experience and expertise with would-be teachers who only have theoretical knowledge from lecturers who are sometimes not quite in touch with the current issues in schools. These experienced teachers are have their finger on the pulse of education at the grass-roots level and would be able to give a true picture of the scenario in school. Building collaborative bridges between educational institutions would definitely be a 'win-win' situation.

In the Malaysian school system, teachers have to perform various duties that take up a great deal of their time. With the current scenario whereby many graduates are jobless, it would be a prudent move to employ them as teacher aides who would be able to assist the classroom teacher. The teachers would then be able to spend more time focusing on teaching besides being able to do classroom-based research and other activities that would ultimately benefit the students.

As an educator and a classroom practitioner, I have at times taken the road less travelled and that has made all the difference in my teaching career. While reflecting, I have changed myself and I have also brought about changes in others. I have learned, unlearned and re-learned and will continue to do so in the hope that it will make me a better educator. As William Butler Yeats said: 'Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.'

## Endnote

- 1 Chiam Heng Keng (1995). *Understanding Children*. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications.