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TEACHERS: FALL FROM GRACE?

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KUALA LUMPUR: Almost every night after dinner, Mariam, a primary school teacher of 20 years, spends about two hours clearing her school work.

With 50 students under her care, she has to prepare daily her record book, teaching kits, charts while marking hundreds of exercise and revision books.

What is most distressing is when there is an examination. She has to fill in each of the eight pages of the report card (50 of them), not only the marks but also the student's name with comments on eight of the subjects taught.

That means she has to write some 400 comments, taking four to five days to complete the task!

Salmah, a secondary school teacher of 11 years, should be at home with her family on the weekends, but for duty sake she has to attend to some co-curricular activities held at her school.

Both Mariam and Salmah are among the 280,000-odd teachers in the country teaching some five million students.

Teaching was once considered a noble profession. But today teachers are up to their neck with work, co-curricular activities, stress and strain, not to mention an image problem and the high expectations from all quarters.

According to the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP), a teacher spends only 40 percent of his or her time in school teaching, and the remaining 60 percent to do clerical work.

The Union admits that teachers today are faced with numerous problems, causing frustration due to heavy workload, working conditions and promotion.

"How does one expect students to excel under such circumstances? They are also the losers as some teachers do not have enough time to teach because of other duties," NUTP secretary-general, N. Siva Subramaniam, says.

He says the list of co-curricular activities will continue to pile up and the authorities will only take notice when it reaches a critical stage. This includes attending short-term and long-term courses and meetings during school hours.

He believes that teaching is a more stressful job now, given the rising incidences of truancy, vandalism, harassment, bullying, thefts and threat in schools.

Siva says other grouses highlighted by teachers include lack of incentives and motivation, recognition, emplacement of teachers without options and not in accordance with school requirements as well as incompatible salary.

"The increase in new subjects plus numerous ad hoc changes are no help to them as it confuses the teachers and decreases their self-confidence in providing effective services," he points out.

He stresses that teaching will become a marginal profession unless it is inspired with new vigour and dignity.

Siva says the knowledge and excellence culture now being promoted would be meaningless if those involved in the management of knowledge have no dignity and not appreciated, being relegated to a supporting role.

He also states that the declining morale among teachers had brought about negative effects on the profession and that a vast majority of them

have become bored with the service.

As such, he calls on the Education Ministry to ensure the survival of the profession by making it an attractive one, to stop the many teachers from contemplating optional retirement since there is no salary increase after reaching a certain grade.

Siva suggests the ministry continue to enhance the morale of teachers and promote teaching as the number one profession. Among the suggestions are:

- + making it easier for teachers to get interest-free loans to buy computers to computer illiteracy among many teachers and prepare for the challenges of the 21st century;

- + Providing a more conducive environment with more teaching aid, support services and other facilities;

- + Introducing a separate professional scheme for teachers to include a different salary structure, service terms and conditions equivalent to the uniqueness of the profession;

- + Book allowances for teachers, study trips overseas for those who have served more than 20 years to enhance their teaching capabilities and knowledge,

- + And, encouraging them to go for post-graduate studies and grant half-pay study leave for the purpose.

In describing teachers' workload today as a "huge burden", Siva also proposes that the staff development programmes in schools be checked and that the programmes are of quality and benefit to the teachers and schools.

The Ministry, on the other hand, faces various challenges in its efforts to engage credible and quality teachers as well as providing a conducive atmosphere for teachers.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said recently that the ministry would try to overcome the problem of headmasters and teachers "forced" to do clerical work, aware that it could cause teachers to lose concentration in their own work since they had to do unrelated tasks.

Other concerted efforts by the ministry included upgrading of college-trained teachers from certificates to diploma level, providing quarters for teachers in rural areas and introducing various changes to the profession.

The Education Ministry had built 2,223 units of houses for teachers who were without houses and by June next year, another 5,094 would be ready for occupancy. Allocation to build houses for teachers under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) is about RM500 million.

On the annual Teachers' Day celebration, Siva says the union feels that the nation's should mark it in a more organised manner.

"The message of the celebration should be made clear and the programme be meaningful and recognised in many ways," he states.

"Apart from giving awards for excellence service, it should also include donations to provide better welfare for families of ailing teachers or those who had passed away."

He says only by upgrading the teaching profession would more youths enter it as a first-choice career.

"And maybe then could we once again regard teaching as a noble, enjoyable and gratifying profession," he adds. -- Bernama