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Teachers impart values too

TEACHING is a noble profession, at least it was once. Time was when teaching was one of three callings in life; the other two being healing and preaching. This vocation attracted some of the best and brightest minds in any and all societies. Teachers were not only models, apart from parents, for the young minds to emulate. They were also in some societies venerated as gurus. They could do no wrong. In the past nearly all teachers upheld the singular virtue of being imparters of knowledge. They were also manifestations of solid moral values. Little wonder then that the profession was once held in high esteem.

Sadly, the profession no longer enjoys the same prestige. Perhaps this could be due to the changing perceptions of societies. They are now regarded as mere conduits of knowledge, one of the many sources of information which is necessary to get through examinations. Parents and students, as well as the society, know this basic fact. This perception has reduced the status of teachers. Contributing too is the gradual erosion of the role teachers traditionally had in the classroom.

Once they were paragons of absolute authority. A glare or a harsh voice was sufficient to instil discipline in the rows of students seated behind desks. That they could enforce that authority with a cane, a feather duster or even a ruler was enough to strike terror in many a recalcitrant student. But alas all these trappings of discipline has been taken away from teachers. That the profession now attracts those who do not succeed in obtaining places in other more lucrative professions and jobs does not help shore up the diminished status of teachers. Still teachers have a vital role in moulding the minds of children.

Parents can only be basic role models for their children. But even the most knowledgeable and brightest of them often turn out to be poor teachers. That job is best left to the profession, most of whom still soldier on, despite the depressing conditions in the school environment and not too bright career prospects. Teachers impart knowledge; more importantly, they are responsible for instilling strong moral values.

That was attested by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Sunday. The occasion was the 28th Teachers' Day celebrations. The event itself is a testimony of the regard and esteem the country has for all teachers. As Dr Mahathir said it is the duty of teachers to ensure that the knowledge and information passed on are put into good use by students. That skill calls for receptive and, in a sense, creative minds which only teachers can mould. Only teachers can translate dry, obtuse mathematical formulae into practical, lively living skills. For one, the Pythagoras Theorem which will remain an abstract formula unless a good teacher explains that it could be used to calculate the height of the aluminium or wooden pole that holds the street light.

More importantly, teachers tend children in their formative years, from the ages of seven to seventeen. During the latter half of this period, the young form their moral values. If left on their own they might pick up the wrong values from other sources such as films and television series. Parents, more often than not, are not always around to guide or to manifest good moral values. And so this sacred task is left to teachers. In sum they foster the minds of the future leaders and the task force of the country.

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