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Restoring respect for our education system


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EVERY now and then, we read with alarm about classroom disruptions, or watch viral videos showing students or parents confronting educators.

We then lament the decline of traditional values, citing a breakdown in home discipline or the corrupting influence of social media.

But by framing this strictly as a crisis of student misconduct, we misdiagnose the problem.

Children do not unlearn respect in a vacuum. They inherit their perceptions of authority from the adults around them.

The erosion of classroom discipline is not an isolated phenomenon. It is the direct consequence of a system that routinely undermines professional judgement, conditions its institutional support and prioritises short-term appeasement over structural accountability.

A teacher cannot reasonably be expected to uphold the dignity of education while being systematically deprived of their own.

Across Asia, as a region long celebrated for revered traditions of respect towards educators, the social contract between the public and the teaching profession has broken down.

In South Korea, severe parental harassment and systemic institutional neglect have pushed educators to take to the streets, demanding protection from bad-faith complaints.

In Malaysian public schools, the erosion of authority begins when a teacher's professional assessment is treated as a draft open to public negotiation.

The transition towards classroom-based assessment was intended to grant educators greater autonomy, allowing them to evaluate students holistically rather than through the narrow lens of standardised examinations.

In practice, however, this autonomy is frequently challenged by parents who view professional evaluations not as expert conclusions but as service outcomes to be disputed.

When an educator's assessment of a child's academic or behavioural standing is met with administrative pushback or aggressive parental resistance, the message sent to the student is clear: the teacher's word is subject to external veto.

Furthermore, institutional support for educators has become deeply conditional.

School administrators, caught between performance metrics and public relations concerns, often default to risk mitigation.

When conflicts arise, whether over minor disciplinary actions, late homework or classroom management, the prevailing instinct is appeasement.

Administrators often yield to the loudest voice, leaving frontline teachers to defend their authority alone.

When an institution signals that it will not stand firmly behind its staff, it effectively strips the latter of their sanctioning power. Students quickly learn that school policies can be bypassed by appealing to the higher authority or threatening public escalation.

In many Malaysian classrooms, teachers are forced to rely on personal negotiation tactics rather than established institutional boundaries to maintain basic order. When discipline becomes a matter of constant personal bargaining, authority shifts from an objective standard to a negotiated favour.

Restoring respect for our education system does not require a return to authoritarianism or arbitrary punishment.

Blind obedience breeds resentment rather than learning.

Instead, it calls for a restoration of the delicate balance between professional empowerment, institutional accountability and genuine respect.

To rebuild this foundation, school leadership must offer unequivocal, structural backing for the reasonable exercise of professional authority. Disciplinary guidelines must be applied consistently across all demographics rather than diluted to avoid uncomfortable confrontations.

Crucially, parents must recognise that undermining a teacher's professional standing does not protect a child.

It deprives them of the essential boundaries required for character development.

We cannot continue to ask why young people no longer respect their teachers while operating a system that treats educators as expendable service providers.

Respect is maintained when an institution values its professionals enough to defend their judgment, enforce its standards and protect the integrity of the classroom.

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