Dr. Fawzia’s Corner

# What is the role of a school?

Forty years ago, when I attended Third year junior high in Taipei, anyone wishing to pass the national senior high school entrance exam and get into one of the top schools, had to have help one way or another. They either had a home tutor, or great parents who tutored themselves, or had to attend an afterschool tutoring center. The same applied, to an even greater extent, to high school seniors wishing to enter university. The competition was intense, and even the best students would get some type of help. In downtown Taipei, not a single street was free of tutoring centers. Any college student could find work as a home tutor. Tutoring was probably the best business to be in. Some teachers were so famous for guaranteeing a good grade on national exams that they would teach to classes as large as 60-70 students, and still get a long waiting list.

Fifteen years ago, I returned to Taiwan on a visit. Near my parents’ house was yet another tutoring center. They distributed flyers all over the neighborhood. Their flyer actually guaranteed enrollment in a university if you attended their classes for a year. There were numerous testimonies from students who had failed the university entrance exams, attended the center for a year, then successfully entered a top university. All those years, and nothing had changed.

The obvious question staring us all in the face is then: what are public schools doing? Why doesn’t the education system allow students to attend highly successful tutoring centers instead of schools, and turn schools into exam centers? If we insist on using only exams as our yardstick for a successful education, then tutors and tutoring centers should take over the role of main provider of public education.