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Inviting School Success

I believe in reading, thus I had told all my 133 Further Professional Diploma in Education (FPDE) participants this year that they will learn more from books than from my lectures. I told them that they should take this golden opportunity to read and thus not only upgrade themselves but to update, uproot and, in the process, be uplifted.

As many have come with all kinds of unfounded apprehensions, I felt that to get them into the reading mode, I should introduce them to some very easy, readable and hopefully helpfully books. I thus told them they could start with "The One Minute Manager meets the Monkey" by Kenneth Blanchard and William Oncken (1989). I had chosen the book for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is extremely readable, but the main reason is for them to critique the One-Minute Manager series, which was very popular in the 80s.

Two weeks later at the start of class, a participant raised the issue that his friend in the private sector told him that this one minute book of time management is outdated, and that there are new packages on time management in the market. Were they therefore reading outdated stuff?

A number of issues were then raised. Can knowledge be outdated? Can lessons on time management be outdated? Can there be one answer to how time is to be managed? If knowledge in this case is outdated, does it mean that all the great writings of the past are no longer relevant today?

A further issue which I had to grapple with is "Is there a body of knowledge that I have to impart to the FPDEs? And is this body of knowledge going to help them to become more effective heads of departments when they graduate? Can there in fact be a body of knowledge that we have to impart to children from 7-16. If we are into this body of knowledge issue would it not mean that pupils would have to "heap it up and display it when called for? (However) this static, cold-storage ideal of knowledge is inimical to educative development. It not only lets occasions for thinking go unused, but it swamps thinking" (Dewey, 1916). But is this what we are about in school? Will the accurate regurgitation of the body of knowledge help a child to succeed in today's educational system?

With knowledge becoming obsolete at such a fast pace, it is no wonder that schools today are teaching processes and applications. These are important skills that we want to help children learn and we need to accept the fact that with information multiplying at such a rapid rate, we will become relatively more ignorant each day.

The topic is "Inviting success" but just what is success? What does a successful person look like? What does a successful school look like? Because we believe that nothing succeeds like success, or success begets success, success has for many become the means and end of education.

What is Success?

I asked a number of people what is success. In fact 6 years ago I started interviewing successful people and I have not stopped talking to successful people even though I have just published the book on "Successful Women in Singapore." I am interested today to find out what differentiates a successful person from a non-successful, taking a number of variables into control.

Besides distinct gender differences

Success is when our students know how to think for themselves. They know how to make decisions, after thinking through alternatives.
where females feel uncomfortable with the word "success" the following are what they tell me in response to the question "What do you think help you to succeed?" Many, in particular, males told me it is "the ability to strike when the iron is hot or to take risks." This is often mentioned as an important ingredient to their success. The power to go on when you fail. Many talked about their commitment to their work and also their convictions. Some are prepared to work 12-14 hours a day. They have a great capacity for work. They talked about persistence, discipline, singlenessmindedness and dedication.

For the few who ran their own companies, they talked about their visions, a businesswoman of the year talked about her dreams to go global, "the sky's the limit" she told me. There was a sense of purpose. They also talked about their tenacity, that they would grapple with a problem and seek multiple alternatives. They also get along well with their staff, i.e., they have good human relationship skills and they know how to get people to work. The successful gentleman who was written up in life a month ago talked about yiqi, something he said he got from The Chinese High School. Lastly, something which came through for many I talked to is their enjoyment of work. Be they stockbrokers or regional directors, they shared their love for their work. Some even spoke with such passion and conviction.

Now why do I digressed into this? When I talk to these men and women I often ask in what ways are schools responsible for their success? Did they learn commitment, risk-taking, singlenessmindedness, discipline, human relationship skills from their schools? Do we teach our students such values or skills in our classrooms? Two told me they attributed their success to the uniformed group which they joined. The uniformed group taught them leadership skills, persistence and the ability to get along with others. Both these successful women were not our brilliant scholars in their school days.

What are we teaching in schools?

Supportive leadership is vital when we want teachers to be productive as well as to enjoy their work.
Effective teachers spend time establishing purpose and helping students understand the worth of what they were going to study and the contribution that knowledge will make to their future.

Most students and sadly teachers too are answer-centred not problem-centred. The school is the place where answers are found. Students seem to think that there is a right answer for every question. It is heartening that schools are moving away from this and no longer are students rewarded for sheer good memory.

What can teachers do

Lest I be accused of rambling I will now talk about things which we can ask our teachers to try out in the classrooms, or to become aware of in their own teaching.

First an awareness issue. Many of our students, ourselves included, are very quick to bring closure to our learning and in this way cheat ourselves of significant learning. We are quick to name things. When I teach sometimes my students say "Oh yeh, it's that theory, and we know it already..." When they say that, they close their mind. McLuhan calls this the "label libel gambit" which is "the tenacity to dismiss an idea by the expedience of making it". You libel by label. We find the right label for some processes and we close off. It happens all the time.

What is worst is when we take the joy out of learning from young children. A child sees a bird, is excited, starts chasing it and says, "Mummy, mummy..." points to it and shouts with delight. And what does mummy or daddy say? "Yes, girl, it's a bird. Now say bird." The excitement of seeing different colours, different sizes, different specimens etc is almost gone when the child says "Bird". Just as we have taken the wonder out from our children, schools I feel should rejuvenate in our pupils this spirit of "wonderment" again - to help them to stand and stare in wonder at the sunset or a little insect. Eisner (1991) believe that school "should create the kind of environment and provide the kinds of tasks that elicit and develop respect for wonder and stimulate the imagination."

McLuhan also discussed about the "rearview mirror" syndrome. He said that most of us are like drivers whose eyes are fixed on the "rearview mirror" i.e., looking at where we are coming from and not where we are going to. When confronsted with new packages, techniques, our question is will these help my students to pass the "O" level examination or the "PSLE"? It is this syndrome which prevents success, innovation or creative ideas from emerging.

Yet another important area is the need for teachers to keep on updating themselves. Recently, I was asked to show a film which I refused because there are such exciting new videos and film in the market and I think it's our responsibility to know about them particularly if we want to use video or film in our classes. Why show "Goodbye Mr Chips" when there are films like "Dead Poets society"? Two of the best videos I've ever watched and I'm never tired of watching them are Joel Barker's "The Business of Paradigms" and "The Power of Vision." The third is coming soon.

People who develop others must constantly develop themselves for "A lamp can never light another lamp unless itself is lighted. A teacher cannot really teach unless s/he is constantly learning" (Tagore). The same goes for those who are in leadership positions for you are people developers.

Promoting Success in School - what can Principals do?

Let me at this stage turn to another issue - what teachers think principals can do or should do to engender success in school. How can you go about "principaling" for success? What does literature have to say about principal's behaviours or actions which seem to promote school success? Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described a condition which enable people to be most productive - pleasure and productivity. He found that given the right conditions, the best part of people's lives is when they are engaged in their daily work. From my own experience, I cannot but agree totally with him. Teachers who are productive are
those who love their work, their school and the kids of course. Now what conditions ensure pleasure and productivity in work? To Deming (1986), there must first be a constancy of purpose. Why are we doing what we are doing? We like to know that what we are doing is meaningful and is purposeful. When I can see the end and how I can get there and the end is meaningful, it establishes for me a clear and energizing sense of purpose. The end must be clear and unified. People also work with greater commitment towards a collective goal.

Secondly, there is a need to see that we are getting better at what we do. This is quite a basic need, when people see improvement they are excited. I have the great pleasure of working with a couple of my colleagues recently and when they saw results they were so excited. I get phone calls to go and see the latest creations and you see a couple of men in their forties gesturing excitedly in front of a little computer. Besides improvement, people also like to make things happen. To de Bono (1985) this is a “direct extension of the child’s wish to place one block on top of another in order to make something happen.”

Thirdly, Deming says there must be a democratic atmosphere. Teachers and students alike can voice their views and know that they will be listened to.

Fourthly, supportive leadership is vital when we want teachers to be productive as well as to enjoy their work. When the principal is supportive of their work, teachers feel good. In the Singapore context, I asked the current batch of 133 FPDE participants to brainstorm a list of principal’s behaviour or actions which could help schools to become successful and one point that crops up very often from your Heads of Department (HODs) is support. Your HODs feel that it is very important to have your support. They say that if principals were supportive, teachers would feel very encouraged and would be prepared to go beyond the call of duty. The FPDEs also felt that principals should support their students especially when they represent their schools in national or district events. The chief function of management is to encourage and support employees.

And finally, create an atmosphere where teachers would not only be productive but would find teaching pleasurable. Deming noted that teamwork and collaborative effort is important. In short, a purposeful, democratic and collegial environment is very important.

Deming felt that management, and in our case, principals should take pains to create a positive and a productive climate in which workers are kept abreast of the most effective methods and practices. But before you think of developing your teachers, freeing your teachers’ mindset, you as people developers must develop yourselves. It is important for leaders to grow for how then can they grow people?

But what do I mean by developing your teachers. As a people developer I am not only thinking of inservice courses, I am thinking of job rotation, job enlargement for your teachers. Some people are discipline masters year in and year out. Let others have a go. The tone of the school may be totally changed with a different discipline teacher. Some of us keep files of each event and when the event crops up, the file is pulled out and the same teachers are assigned the same jobs. One of my participants tell me that it’s safer to do it this way. Safety (often it’s unnecessary fears) at the expense of developing teachers?

When teachers are stretched and I don’t mean giving them more periods or more extra-curricular activities, but when they pick up new skills like running a camp they are excited and their self-esteem could be enhanced and when that happens you have a winner - a positive, excited teacher who in turn would benefit students they teach. Your job as a people developer is to help teachers to see themselves positively. Teachers need to have a positive and realistic attitude about themselves and their abilities before they are able to reach out to like and respect others.

In our case our teachers are fairly well in-serviced and they are kept very up-to-date. The issue thus is to know what to adapt and not to adopt lock stock and barrel, to know what works and to use the methods intelligently.

Way before the ranking of schools started, I know that most principals analyse their "O" level and PSLE examination results. Some have even gone into great details. This is important for we need to know such data. However, getting the data, interpreting the data is one thing, the next is to seek ways to improve. It is important that this sensitive process is done without any blame. Once fingers are pointed, teachers will defend and withdraw and this will only aggravate the situation. Dispel fear and blame...
and people will work better. Data is collected to look for ways to improve. As leaders your job is to get the data and to ask the right questions not to tell your teachers what to do.

What do your 133 HODs say are things which you can do to help engender success in school? Of the many responses, I categorised them roughly into four categories. Top of the list, one which was mentioned by many of the FPDEs is what I termed "Pupil/teacher relationship". In this category, your HODs feel that principals should (in order of frequency):

- be firm and fair to all teachers;
- talk/relate to teachers;
- support teachers;
- not flog the willing horse;
- create a high staff morale;
- trust teachers;
- give recognition when its due.

These are the ones that cropped up a fair bit, those that were only mentioned by a few are not included in this list. Here we see your HODs stating that one factor that will engender success is your relationship with teachers.

Next on the list is the principal's leadership role. Your HODs feel that the principal should have a clear vision. This was mentioned by a great number of them. In this category, HODs feel that a clear vision will enable you to prioritize activities and be selective and focussed. They also felt that realistic goals are important.

The third category is that of "Principal and Pupil Relationship". The HODs feel that the principal should give strong moral support to students and to attend national or district events where the pupils are participating. They claimed that if the principals take a real interest in the pupils, talk to them and such likes, pupils would be encouraged to succeed.

Finally I have named the last category the principal's behaviours. FPDEs feel that principals could be a bit more decisive, also be more thorough in planning and be a role model. From this we could see that what the 133 FPDEs have listed as variables that could invite success are quite similar to what was discussed earlier.

Enhancing school success

One of the issues that I'm interested in is to seek out variables that we can alter to enhance success. When we talk about family background, neighbourhood gangs etc, these are not something which we in school can alter; we have no control over them. It is no wonder that Edmonds found that in effective schools he identified, if the students did not learn, the schools do not blame them or their families, their background or the neighbourhoods. Effective schools in his study did not alibi. Schools took full responsibility and they discarded whatever was not successful.

With the focus on input and output, I want now to look at some processes. What are some things which we can do in the classroom to help our students? One of the first things that comes to my mind is again the issue of "purpose". Even teaching at my level, we have to spend time telling FPDEs why we teach certain modules, and how these modules will help them in their work. FPDEs want to know why they are spending time learning things which seemingly are of no use to them.

The literature tells us that effective teachers spend time establishing purpose and helping students understand the worth of what they were going to study and the contribution that knowledge will make to their future. William Glasser (1990) remarked that "We should explain much more than we do now...about why we teach the things we do."

Secondly, give students a vision - a vision of their future, a scenario about their future. In the video "The Power of Vision" Barker talks in depth about this need for a positive vision. When children have a vision about their future, what they would like to do in the
future, this vision will guide and steer them on. He told us how a positive vision of their future empowered a whole cohort of black students to succeed in their academic career. We could get our students to think about their future, what they would like to be and how they could get there.

Thirdly, we need to refocus and relook at the way we think about our students. When I asked secondary school teachers what is the most exciting thing for them in the new year, they told me about all kinds of things. Then when I asked what is one thing which they dreaded most next year, nearly all told me without any hesitation "Normal Tech." Even before these students step into your schools, the anxieties they generate among your teachers, the fears some of them have - are these not quite unfounded? The vocational institutes and the primary schools have had them all these years.

Numerous studies by Brophy and Good (1974), Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) have shown that teachers' attitude and opinions regarding their students have a significant influence on their success in school. When teachers believe that their students can achieve, the students appear to be more successful. It seems self-evident that for students to learn in schools, they require sufficient confidence in themselves and their abilities to make some effort to succeed. If I know I have a fighting chance I will fight, but if I think there is hardly a scrap of hope, why work? One of the greatest gift you can give your students is confidence. We limit ourselves.

Fourthly, students learn best when there is freedom from threat. But here I am not suggesting that you be permissive. A teacher who disciplines shows he cares. And a word about discipline. As leaders in your schools, take a look at how your discipline master disciplines. Some discipline masters shame teenagers in front of the whole school, other nag, scold, yell for hours! All these often cause students to react negatively and compound the situation.

Fifthly, provide an educational atmosphere of success rather than failure (Purkey, 1984). Some schools make you feel so good when you enter the gates. Staircases are turned into reading corners, extra space are turned into study areas and such likes. They have such conducive atmosphere for students to study. Others are shockingly bare of life and spirit.

If you walk around most schools, you'll see so many "NO" signs, no talking (in the library); no running (along corridors); no food to be taken out of the tuckshop, no eating etc. Put up encouraging cheerful signs rather than "NO" signs and rules. Put up witty one liners.

Speak to your students, do not talk down or scold. Tell your students your concerns, tell them their plusses, ask them to help make their school count, make them proud to be associated with their school.

Now what about some "handles" that I can share with you? I think amongst yourselves you have a lot of "handles" - tap each others ideas. When I was teaching in Kim Seng Technical, many of my students could not write. After two periods of writing, some only managed to write two paragraphs and most have to take their work home to complete. What does one do? One of the most effective ways to get students to write is called "Spontaneous writing" or "Composition Derby" (Holt, 1967). When I was studying for my Malay examinations in the sixties, I wrote an essay every night - gave myself twenty minutes and more. The aim was to help me to write. By the time I sat for my exams, I was writing so fluently. When I taught EL2 students I used this method too and it was extremely effective. Composition Derby literally is getting kids to write quickly as in a race, without worrying about spelling, grammar or sentence construction. Write about anything that comes into their mind which is related to the topic.

I suggest that Composition Derby be carried out everyday, five to ten minutes per day. This should also be a whole school effort. Now, you may ask "What about marking? You don't mark." Through this method I have seen great improvements in my students. The length of their writing doubles, triples in no time. Now what topic? Any topic that excites. We learn writing by writing not by reading about writing.

For those who are shy, lack confidence, do not talk, have "Talking Derby" - where the class is divided into two groups and members in each group take turns to give one-minute talks. The issue again is not content or grammatically correct sentences.

I have been told that many students cannot read and in the oral English examination in Primary 6, some students score as low as 1/10 for reading. I believe in peer teaching because both the teacher and the taught will improve. Have patience - something we don't have in this fast lane which demands instant results. You could pair up a Primary 3 class with a Primary 1 class and have the Primary 1 children read to the Primary 3 children. Research tells us that if a weak reader say in Primary 3 is given the task to help another student who is in Primary 1 to read, his own reading improves. He becomes interested and is concerned that he cannot read Primary 1 work so he begins to work hard on his own. I wonder if we could make more effective use of USSR ('Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading').

We have a way of making students dislike reading and writing. We ask them to read and after that we follow up by asking them numerous questions to check on their understanding and also to check if they have read. Why write book reviews? They can get the review from the back of the cover. Also if a 12 year old reads a book meant for an 8 year old it's perfectly okay. And even if he reads one chapter and goes on to read another book, it is okay. Even if he reads the first and the last chapter, it is still okay. The aim is to nurture and help them to enjoy reading.

We should also examine some of our rules and regulations. I remember in my school day I have to do correction and "re-re-corrections" because I may get the part I am supposed to correct right, but I made another mistake else-
where. Some teachers have a rule that if pupils make three mistakes or more they must redo the whole piece of work. The goal is neat and careful work. But by applying it rigidly, the teacher, instead of getting nearer and more careful work, received more untidy work because pupils were so concerned about not making three mistakes that they could not concentrate. Having pupils to redo the whole thing creates boredom, anxiety and they become less sharp and make more mistakes.

I feel it is important for teachers and principals to stop and ask themselves a vital question which is "Of all the things we do, which help or hinder learning?" "Of all the things principals do, which help or hinder teachers from giving their best or from enjoying their work? Can I cut down on them?"

"Of all the things I do as an inspector of school what help or hinder the principals whom I am supervising to be more or less effective?" How can we do things that will help others in their work, how can we become more aware of the things we do which hinder people in their work?

We assume that when teachers teach, students learn, that all teaching produces learning. I feel that sometimes some form of teaching hinders or prevents learning. Once we can honestly answer these questions and realise that some things we do are not helpful, others useless, yet others harmful, we can begin to improve. Principals should ask where we are trying to go (goal) and is what we are doing now helping us to get there? Another basic question is "Do we know for real why our students fail?" What actually cause their failure? Do we know? Is it a lack of mental ability? Lack of discipline? Poor teaching? Lack of time for study? What is it?

It has been said that children enter school as question marks and leave as full-stops. If this were true we certainly have a lot to answer for. The purpose of education to John Dewey "should be to ingrain into the individual's working habits, method of inquiry and reasoning, appropriate to various problems that present themselves." He saw education as preparing the learner to "fit" into his society, yet fitting the individual into society to grow, helping the individual "to progressively realise present possibilities and thus make individual better fitted to cope with later requirements. Growing is a continuous leading into the future." If we can achieve this, if our students were to leave us with working habits that question and reason then we have succeeded.

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sive Activity. New York: Delacorte Press


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This paper was presented at Principals' Conference 1993.

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