Changing Directions in Postgraduate Teacher Preparation at NIE

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Introduction

With major curricular and structural changes planned for the education system, and the emphasis on Information Technology, National Education, Creative and Critical Thinking and the Cluster Schools concept, the National Institute of Education (NIE) Singapore's sole teacher education institution has been challenged to review and restructure its initial teacher training programmes to better align them to the needs of the schools. This paper touches on some of the changes in postgraduate teacher preparation programmes at NIE.

Initial teacher training is the first stage in the professional preparation of graduates for the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) teacher trainees at NIE before they assume their positions of responsibility for instruction and leadership in the classrooms and the school. The programme is a one academic year programme. NIE seeks to prepare the teacher trainees for a life-long learning journey, through development of desirable attitudes and values, building on existing foundations of content knowledge, the understanding of teaching and learning processes and the pedagogical skills to teach effectively in a variety of school contexts as a 'reflective practitioner'.

Profile of the PGDE Graduate Teacher

Before discussing the changing directions in the initial training of graduate teachers, it is useful to have a picture of the type of graduates who opt to join the teaching profession. A recent pre-programme survey of the PGDE July 1998 cohort, conducted by Dr Soh Kay Cheng et al covered a wide range of aspects, for example, the teacher trainees professional characteristics, personal expectations, views on teaching, schooling and pupils. Results of this survey provided a profile of the NIE graduate teacher trainees at the beginning of the PGDE training programme.

The survey results showed that the teacher trainees can be characterised as young people, largely female, who have the confident and positive attitudes necessary for working in our dynamic education system with its new thrusts and impending changes. Although they have entered teaching with idealistic yet individualistic motives, they recognise the strengths of the current system. They do disagree with some specific practices but they are aware of the contributions they can make to the nation. They recognise that the teaching of both knowledge and values are important parts of their responsibilities. As employees of the Ministry of Education, their expectations are reasonable but they are especially concerned with the opportunity for professional up-grading and career advancement (Soh, K.C., 1998).

Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge

There is a perceived need by the MOE, the Schools and NIE, to emphasise the attitudinal and values orientation in the preparation of teacher trainees. There is now broad consensus that it is desirable for trainees to have the right mindset, to be open and responsive to change, and be able to take risks and yet to stay aligned with educational goals. With the right attitudes, trainees are expected to push themselves hard for the acquisition of knowledge and skills. This is illustrated in Fig. A, showing the importance of Attitudes (A), Skills (S) and Knowledge (K). A major on-going review of the curriculum in Education Studies, Curriculum Studies and the Practicum at NIE, aims to provide the postgraduate teacher trainee with more time to read and reflect and to attend professional growth and development workshops and seminars.
Influencing the attitudes of teacher trainees can be achieved through modelling of good attitudes and practices; setting training goals to include attitudes' development and an evaluation system that recognises and rewards good attitudes and professional conduct.

While the NIE lectures and modules have not been explicitly structured to develop mindsets and attitudes in teacher trainees, NIE has long recognised that it is critical to motivate trainees and deepen their desire to be better teachers. Education Studies modules which have traditionally leaned toward mass lectures and tutorials are now being restructured to enable tutoring in smaller groups to better model good attitudes and practices.

In addition, two weeks in November and a week in May (after the examinations) are specially assigned for professional talks, seminars and discussions, National Education seminars and visits; and personal effectiveness seminars for personal development. Many of the staff conducting such enrichment courses are from the MOE. Some of the talks and seminars organised include the following topics:

**Topics on Creativity**
- mind mapping: a tool for creativity in the classroom
- creativity in science
Psychological issues such as
- sexuality issues and sex education
- affective and career education programme
- emotional intelligence: improving relationships with colleagues and students
- emergency behaviour management

Topics on personal effectiveness
- "are you ready for love"
- "coping with stress"
- cartooning - the art of presentation

Topics of professional interest and growth
- talk by Extra Curricular Activities Centre (ECAC)
- training in the 21st century - (talk by Staff Training Branch, MOE)
- teachers and the law - (talk by STU)
- talk by teachers' network

National Education topics and visits
- bilateral relation with neighbours
- multiracialism in Singapore
- our current economic climate
- visit to SAF installation and camps

Some curricular changes within modules in the PGDE programme

To meet the new curricular initiatives NIE has streamlined certain modules in the postgraduate primary programme e.g. in the teaching of Art and Music topics have been streamlined so as to reduce the number of modules. In the secondary programme all curriculum studies subjects have been streamlined to have the same number of academic units. Course content in curriculum studies has increased emphasis on the use of IT, both with staff modelling the use of IT during lectures, and IT being used as a learning tool by trainees. The core course on Instructional Technology has been refined to ensure that trainees develop more than the basic skills on the computers. Trainees learn to make effective use of Instructional Technologies in the classroom, by selecting, creating, evaluating and integrating Instructional Technologies and resource materials.

Creativity and critical thinking skills are dealt in modules in Education Studies and in the Curriculum Studies subject related modules. NIE has run Thinking Education seminars, Summer Institutes and hosted the 7th International Conference on Thinking to promote consciousness about the importance of thinking skills education, the ability to infuse thinking skills in the curriculum and to effectively evaluate creative and critical thinking skills.

National Education (NE) has been incorporated more visibly into NIE's curriculum. NIE aim to educate the teacher trainees on the origins and history of our nation and expose the trainees to the vulnerabilities and challenges which face our nation. It also deals with how Singapore works to overcome these problems. There are three main areas where National Education is incorporated into the curriculum:

- many of these NE issues are infused into various modules in Education Studies e.g. social context modules and in curriculum studies modules e.g. in History, Geography, Chemistry, Biology and related subjects.
• Trainees have a four-day National Education seminar that they attend in November that deals with issues such as, bilateral relations with our neighbours, multi-racialism in Singapore, our current economic climate and visits to SAF installations.

• Trainees view the MOE-NE video - Newsteach every month. This exposes them to current affairs and challenges that Singapore faces at the present moment.

The secondary graduate trainees PGDE (Sec) are by and large selected on the basis of their academic subject qualifications obtained from university studies. Some PGDE (Pri) graduate trainees may lack the academic background of school-subject related content, (e.g., graduates who are lawyers, engineers, sociologists, and business administration graduates). This group of teacher trainees who lack the content knowledge of the teaching subjects in schools (e.g., Physics, English Grammar, Mathematics, Mother-tongue languages and English Literature) may require basic content upgrading on syllabus content as a pre-requisite to classroom teaching. These enrichment courses (with extra curriculum time needed) can be offered either before initial training at NIE or after their NIE training, through inservice modules, to be completed during their induction year after being posted to schools. This will consolidate and to build upon what they have learned in initial training. This can be seen in Chinese mother-tongue courses and certain science courses eg. Physics to be taught in schools by Engineering graduates who will undergo a six-months Physics content course before coming to NIE.

The Practicum - Partnership model

The practicum-partnership model is a new and important development in the way of thinking about providing trainee teachers with the best of the practical experiences teachers have about teaching. There are many partnership models around the world, and it is now acknowledged that no single institution, especially a campus-based programme, can train the teacher alone. Research in teacher training has pointed out that school practitioners’ knowledge is very important in providing trainees with insights about the instructional contexts where learning application will take place (McIntyre, 1994, and M. Cameron Jones, 1997). At NIE, we can provide the skills lists and theories, but an area like classroom management is best learned in schools. While the campus is best for learning about teaching, learning to teach is best done at a school under the guidance of experienced and supportive teachers. The teacher-practitioner or co-operating teacher, acting as mentor and guide, supports and helps develop these important skills to complete the training of graduate teacher trainees. Based on lessons learned from the UK, and with the active support of the Ministry of Education, Singapore’s schools have now taken a bigger stakehold in teacher training. Also, the recent doubling of intakes of the initial graduate teacher trainees to meet the needs of the education system, has made the adoption of the Partnership model a more pragmatic option. School postings will be done by the MOE based on vacancies available in schools. In this way schools will have ‘ownership’ of the teacher trainees. The concept of partnership rests upon an understanding of complimentary strengths and how this can be effectively joined for the benefit of the teacher trainees. There is now greater collaboration between NIE and schools as more Principals, Senior Teachers and HODs are taking up position of Adjunct Lecturers at NIE.

In essence, the School Principal would work together with a School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) [who could be the school Vice-Principal, a Senior Teacher or a Head of Department] and a NIE Supervision coordinator (NSC). Each school would have six to eight teacher trainees (TT) posted to the school and they would have one or two cooperating teachers (CT) each to guide them. The NIE Supervision Coordinator would supervise all the TTs in all subjects in the school (or a cluster of schools) and not just those TTs who teach their curriculum subject.
The SCM would coordinate the in-school Practicum and T-T Mentoring scheme, liaising between the school and NIE and be a group mentor and coach to the ITs and younger CTs. The SCM will arrange meetings to oversee assessment, coaching, mentoring and completion of practicum supervision for each TT with their respective CTs. A Practicum Panel, chaired by the school principal together with the SCM and NSC, will decide on grades to be awarded to TTs. The Practicum assessment has been modified into a 3 point grading system with Distinction, Pass and Fail categories.

The NSC would observe the TT once in the classroom, but would be always available to liaise with schools and SCMs, oversee work of the TTs under their charges, moderate performance of TTs across the school or schools, and endorse final grades agreed upon by the Practicum panel.

The CTs role is to introduce the TTs to their classes, help them prepare for classroom teaching and management, as well as to observe, monitor, guide, advise and assess the TTs.

Figure C

Assessment of Practicum
by: School Practicum Panel

- Cooperating Teachers
  - formative assessment
  - summative report
- Principal and NIE Supervision Coordinator
  - comments and endorsement

- School Coordinating Mentor
  - award of grade and comments
In recent years, beginning from 1996, NIE has received big enrolments of PGDE teacher trainees for initial teacher training. This academic year, NIE has taken on an additional cohort in January 1999 which the MOE has recruited to meet the projected increase in teacher demand, for the increasing student enrolments expected from year 2001-2006. An additional consideration in recruiting this extra cohort is the availability of manpower in the market at this time of economic downturn with the lack of jobs in the open market. NIE took in 950 PGDE teacher trainees in July 1998 and is expected to enrol another 900-1200 graduates in January 1999.

The big enrolment of graduate teacher trainees and the double intake in July 1998 and January 1999 within one academic year has resulted in two models of training as shown in Figure E. Although the time in training will more or less be the same, there will be some differences in the scheduling of modules and especially the practicum period.
2nd model

Jan-Feb March-June June-Sept Sept-Nov

PRACTICE ↔ THEORY ↔ PRACTICE ↔ THEORY
School Experience Language Teaching practice

January 1999 Intake (one calendar year)

Semester 1

June

School Experience March June

7 weeks 15 weeks lectures at NIE

July 1998 Intake

1. Begins with orientation on courses, programmes and modules at NIE.

2. The teacher trainees begin their training at NIE with lectures and tutorials in Education Studies, Curriculum Studies, and Language Enrichment. After 7 weeks lectures this batch will be posted for 1 week of School Experience with observation, data gathering and some classroom teaching. They will return to NIE and continue lectures until November, and 8 weeks into the January semester until March.

3. In March, the teacher trainees will be posted by MOE to schools for 9 weeks Practicum. The Partnership model of supervision will be applied.

4. They come back to NIE for 1 week in May for Post-Practicum rounding-up and feedback sessions.

5. They will be posted back to the same schools in mid-May.

Semester 2

September

School Practicum June November

10 weeks 10 weeks lectures at NIE

January 1999 Intake

1. Begins with a condensed 1 week orientation, and Teacher Preparatory programme involving lectures on: lesson components such as questioning, lesson clarity, instructional objectives, and strategies to deal with pupil understanding and motivation and pupil interactions.

2. The teacher trainees will be posted in January, by MOE for 7 weeks School Experience of observation and classroom teaching in schools.

3. In March, this batch will come into NIE for 15 weeks of lectures and tutorials in Curriculum and Education Studies, and Language Enrichment.

4. From June to September, the teacher trainees will be posted to schools for the 10 weeks Practicum with the Partnership model of supervision being applied.

5. They come back for more lectures at NIE in September. They will be posted to schools in mid-November/December.
Concluding Remarks

The main area for future comparison and study between the two models will be in the varying lengths of time and experience gained from School Experience. The January 1999 batch will enter NIE for lectures after 7 weeks of school experience whereas the July 1999 batch may, or may not have had any experience in school before attending lectures at NIE. This will open up new areas of research between different intakes with respect to entry qualification and its effects on teacher training. The current strong focus at NIE, on knowledge component and its extensive coverage of the teaching skills to be taught, will be affected by the teachers trainees’ attitudes and experiences gained before attending initial training lectures. The perceived gap between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ can hopefully be bridged by this initial experience in classroom practice gained during school experience. Lecturers will be able to draw on trainee’s own experiences to model and demonstrate theories. Trainees will be able to read up, and reflect on, their own experiences to better understand the learning process.

Given the intermediate changes made recently to the PGDE teacher training programme, to meet the new educational initiatives of the MOE, NIE is in a much better position to collaborate with schools in the training of postgraduate teachers. The big enrolment figures and double intakes in an academic year, necessitate new measures and closer tripartite collaboration between the MOE, Schools and NIE. This signals a significant new phase in the initial teacher training in Singapore, with new strategic planning to be carried out in collaboration with the MOE and Schools.

References