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**A CASE FOR DISTINCTION :  
THE DISTINCTION TEACHING PRACTICE STUDENT**

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**A CASE FOR DISTINCTION :  
THE DISTINCTION TEACHING PRACTICE STUDENT**

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**1. Introduction**

In 1991, 249 student teachers began teaching practice in Singapore secondary schools and Junior Colleges, as part of their one year Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme [PGDE(Sec)] at the Institute of Education. Twenty of them gained a distinction for this component of their programme. This paper draws on quantitative background data held by the Institute and interviews with seventeen of these distinction student teachers to throw light on the processes involved in their becoming distinction student teachers.

**2. Background Data**

Information routinely collected by the Institute of Education at admission, examination results and formative teaching practice grades are used in the analysis that follows. The data sheds light on the entry characteristics of the distinction students, their performance in key taught courses, as well as their grades in practical teaching at the beginning and end of teaching practice. By comparing this data with data for the PGDE(Sec) population as a whole ( 1 ) , it is possible to address a number of questions which are interesting in themselves, but of particular interest in the context of the Practical Curriculum programmes that have been a feature of IE since 1986. Questions that the analysis helps to answer about success on teaching practice are : (i) are distinction teaching practice already 'different' in some way from other students on entry to the programme (ii) is success on teaching practice associated with success on taught courses in the training programme (iii) and, most generally, are distinction teaching practice students 'born and not made' ?

**2.1 Entry Characteristics**

Data was made available from central records on a number of entry characteristics of the student teachers : gender, age, parental income, 'O' and 'A' level results and degree results. These variables are firstly correlated with teaching practice scores for the whole student population. Then they are used as a basis for comparing distinction with non-distinction students.

### 2.1.1 Correlation of Teaching Practice Scores with Selected Examination Results and Parental Income at Admission

Table 1 shows the correlation of selected variables with the students' teaching practice scores for the PGDE(Sec) student population. The correlation coefficients are small, the largest one being with degree type.

**Table 1**

#### Correlation of Teaching Practice Scores with Background Variables

'O' Level	+ 0.093	p = n.s.
'A' Level	+ 0.100	p = n.s.
Parental Income	+ 0.086	p = n.s.
Degree Type	+ 0.239	p < 0.01

### 2.1.2 Background Variables by Distinction and Non-Distinction Teaching Practice Students

#### Age and Gender

The composition of both groups with regard to age and gender is approximately the same : approximately one quarter of the intake came straight from University and a further quarter had joined IE some six or more years after having left University ; females outnumber males in an an approximate ration of 13 : 7.

#### Parental Income

When the two groups are directly compared in terms of the remaining variables, there are no differences in 'O' and 'A' Level qualifications (2). There do appear to be differences in terms of parental income, but these just fall short of being statistically significant. For example, when students are grouped into 'low', 'middle' and 'upper' parental income groups, approximately half of the distinction students fall into the upper category and one third the middle category compared with 38 % and 34 % respectively for the non-distinction students. Though not statistically significant, the differences are marked enough to merit further investigation.

## Degree

There is a clear difference between the two groups with regard to degree type as Table 2 shows. The distinction students entered IE with better degree classifications than non-distinction student teachers. Table 3 re-expresses this information in terms of a division of students into Hons 3 and pass degree holders on the one hand, and degree holders with a Hons 2.2 or higher. Approximately two thirds of the distinction students have an Hons 2.2 degree or higher, while the position is almost exactly reversed for the non-distinction students.

**Table 2**

	N	Degree Type (a)			
		Hons 1 / Masters	Hons 2.1	Hons 2.2	Hons 3/ Pass
Distinction	19	1 (6)	6 (33)	5 (28)	7 (33)
Non-Distinction	196	10 (5)	19 (10)	41 (21)	126 (64)

ch sq = 9.48 df = 3 p < 0.05

**Table 3**

	N	Degree Type (b)	
		Hons 2(2) and Higher	Third/ Pass
Distinction	19	12 (63%)	7 (37%)
Non-Distinction	196	70 (36%)	126 (64%)

### 3. Performance on Taught Courses at IE

In order to examine the relationship of performance on teaching practice with performance on taught courses at IE, the students' total score on IE-based courses, together with scores for two key course components were selected for analysis. The key course components are the first, 'main' teaching subject ( Curriculum Subject Option 1 : CSO1 ), and the Educational Theory course ( Principles, Issues and Practice in Education : PIPE ). Grades in the end of programme examinations, sat by the students after teaching practice had ended, are used in the analysis. The bulk of teaching, however, took place before teaching practice. As Table 4 shows, the correlations are small, but positive.

### 3.1 Correlation of Teaching Practice Scores with Taught Courses

**Table 4**

**Correlation of Taught Courses and Teaching Practice**

Main Teaching Subject ( CS01 )	+ 0.295	p< 0.01
Education Theory ( PIPE )	+ 0.203	p< 0.01
Total Coursework Mark	+ 0.338	p< 0.01

### 3.2 Taught Course by Distinction and Non-Distinction Teaching Practice Students

#### Main Teaching Subject

Although there is a difference in grades, with almost 70 % of distinction students achieving an A or B grade, as opposed to only 42% of the non-distinction students, the differences are not statistically significant at the 5% level. All of the distinction students scored higher than a pass, and none failed.

#### Educational Studies

There were no noticeable difference in scores for this course component.

#### Total Coursework Mark

When the groups are compared in terms of their total examination scores for all taught courses in IE there are clear differences.

**Table 5**

**Total Mark for Taught Courses**

		Score				
	N	<50	50-59	60-69	70-79	>80
Distinction	19	0	1	3	9	6
Non-Distinction	196	16	36	70	56	18

chi sq = 15.01 df = 3 p<0.01 ( 2 left columns combined )

#### 4. Teaching Practice

When students began teaching practice, those who were to achieve a distinction grade typically had higher qualifications than the rest. Also, if end of programme examination results can be taken as an indicator of subject proficiency at the beginning of teaching practice, they were also more successful in their taught courses.

##### 3.1 Formative Grades

Turning now to the teaching practice itself, an obvious question of interest is whether these initial differences in academic ability were reflected in the formative grades awarded by supervisors. On each visit, supervisors were asked to record comments and grades for five teaching 'processes' : Planning, Inducting, Communicating, Managing and Evaluating. Analysis of these grades reveals clear differences between the distinction and non-distinction students at the first observational visit. (3)  
( L. Sharpe, 1990 )

##### 3.1.1 Supervisors' Formative Teaching Practice Grades : First Visit

Table 6 shows the means and standard deviations for the grades awarded to distinction and non-distinction students by supervisors on their first observational visits. For purposes of calculation, grades have been converted into numerical equivalents used at the time, using a 1 - 11 scale. ( e.g. 11=A; 10=A-; 8=B ). The t values for each comparison are significant at the 0.01 level .

**Table 6**

**Means and Standard Deviations for  
First Supervisor Observations**

		Mean	Std Dev
(i)	PLANNING		
	Distinction	9.07	1.87
	Others	6.62	1.99
(ii)	INDUCTING		
	Distinction	7.92	1.85
	Others	6.02	1.9
(iii)	COMMUNICATING		
	Distinction	8.43	0.56
	Others	6.31	2.02
(iv)	MANAGING		
	Distinction	7.87	1.64
	Others	6.2	1.86
(v)	EVALUATING		
	Distinction	8.00	1.70
	Others	5.5	1.85

Distinction students achieved higher grades on average on the first supervisory visit than did non-distinction students : a significantly higher number of them achieved 'A' or 'B' grades. Highest grades were achieved for the Planning and Communicating teaching processes, and lowest for Inducting and Management. The largest differences between the groups occur with the Planning and Evaluating grades. For Planning, the mean for the distinction students is equivalent to a B+ grade , whereas for the non-distinctions it is around C+ to B-. For Evaluating, the mean for the distinction students is equivalent to a B grade, whereas for the non-distinction students it is around C to C+.

### **3.1.2 Progress and Deterioration over the Teaching Practice**

Analysis of formative grades awarded by supervisors on subsequent observational visits is still underway. Preliminary results suggests, however, that the early successes of the distinction students in the Planning and Communicating processes are consolidated, with the largest subsequent improvements being recorded for the Managing role. Though having a headstart, there was still work to be done over the practice.

The figures, of course, mask differences in individual grade profiles. Though some distinction students were given 'A' grades from the beginning, a few others began modestly with relatively poor grades in certain teaching processes, but managed to improve substantially over the teaching practice. Such individual differences will be examined at a later stage in the research project.

## **4. Distinction Teaching Practice Students by Subject Area**

One further dimension that requires analysis before proceeding to the students' own accounts is the spread of distinction students across the main teaching subject areas. ( e.g. within IE English Language and English Literature form the English Subject Area ).

There are significant differences. Taking the six main subject areas, in one area students had an approximate one in seven chance of gaining a distinction; in three others they had a one in twenty chance ; whilst in a further two there were no distinctions at all. At this point in time it has not been possible to investigate these differences.

#### 4. Distinction Students' Own Accounts

Seventeen of the nineteen distinction students, now teachers, met in groups of 4 or 5 on two Saturday mornings in October 1991 at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. The first group comprised three Junior College teachers ; the second, one secondary school and three Junior College teachers ; the third, one Central Institute, one Junior College teacher and three secondary school teachers ; and the fourth one secondary and four Junior College teachers.

The teachers were presented with two tasks, the second one being disclosed to them only after the first had been completed :

- (i) to brainstorm the reasons for their having achieved a distinction on their Teaching Practice
- (ii) individually, to write advice for students about to go on teaching practice in January 1992.

The brainstorming sessions were open-ended and there was no interruption or guidance from the researcher. Tape-recordings were made and later transcribed, along with the flip-charts.

It was decided to incorporate an opportunity for individuals to further reflect on the group discussions and to have an opportunity to record what they felt were their own individual points. Though group discussions have certain advantages such as helping to tease out meanings and prompting memories, they can become dominated by one or two group members.

Methodologically, the first activity sought to elicit the teachers' ' definition of the situation' : aspects of TP considered important in gaining a distinction. The second activity sought to elicit associated 'strategies' : what you should do to gain a distinction. From this information, ideal-types could then be constructed, and at a later point taken back to the teachers as part of a process of ' participant verification' ( L. Sharpe 1985 ).

##### 4.1 Results of Brainstorming

Although the groups met on different occasions, and although there was no guidance from the researcher, similar categories were identified by each of the groups and are reproduced in Table 6 below. At this stage only the categories are reproduced and no attempt is made to prioritize them.

**Table 6****Categories Identified by All the Groups**

1. Knowledge of, and relationships, with students
2. Content knowledge and love of subject
3. Hard work and planning
4. Personality
5. Relationships with Cooperating Teachers and Supervisors

**Miscellaneous Areas ( One group only )**

1. Luck
2. Use of school facilities.

**4.2 Individual Recipes for Success**

Once the brainstorming sessions were over, the teachers were invited to make written responses to the following statement :

" In January, the next batch of NIE students will be going on TP. What advice can you give them for making it a success ".

A content analysis of the written statements revealed five major and five minor categories. ' Knowledge of and Relationship with Students ', together with ' Relationships with Supervisor, CT and Other School Personnel ' were the most frequently mentioned, each receiving comments from 12 of the 17 teachers. Selected comments are reproduced below :

**4.2.1 Knowledge of and Relationships with Students (12 Comments)**

Know your pupils. Understand their feelings and needs. Maintain a good relationship with them - care for your pupils. (T1)

Once in school, find out about pupils' background and modify your expectations and standards accordingly. Also, time to time, make adjustments to your teaching. (T6)

Essentially to establish good rapport with your students - this enhances communication and understanding...Last but not least, a genuine love for the students - you want to help them. Put them in your blood, eat with them, laugh with them, "envy" with them... share a lesson with them, not force it down their throats !! You must genuinely **care** for them. (T7)

We always have the notion that students don't understand. We are wrong. They do understand and they do empathise. Speak to your students and they will love you. (T10)

In any kind of school - be strict ( make your standards known ), be fair ( very, very important, if you want your students to respect you ! ) and be kind ( remember, pastoral care ?? ) (T11)

A definite must : build rapport with students ( they are the ones that are the most important to you as a teacher ) i.e. be friendly, concerned, but also be firm. (T14)

Our main concern is to meet the students' needs, not the CTs' and supervisors'. (T15)

#### **4.2.2 Relationship with Supervisors, CT(s) and Other School Personnel**

Get along with your supervisor and CT because no matter how much you know about your subject or how hard you work, you will still not make the grade if you do not have a good working relationship with your supervisor/CT. Willingness to learn from CT and supervisor and strike a balance between them when they have conflicting beliefs. (T3)

Relate well with the school, CTs and supervisor and students... Relate well with school technicians, lab technicians and attendants so that they will be willing to assist you when the needs arise (T5)

Dress well, be diplomatic, greet and smile at your colleagues, supervisors and the servants of the school. (T9)

SMILE ! ( to practically everyone around school i.e. outside classroom hours ). Build a good relationship with your CT, supervisor etc. etc. ( your grades depend on them ! ) (T11)

Build up a good working relationship with your supervisor and CT before TP ( e.g. during school experience ). (T14)

Humble yourself and always be ready to accept/be receptive towards feedback ( positive and negative ) given by the supervisor/CT/other teachers... Do not be overly concerned with the grades on the APT form and never conduct a lesson simply for the sake of showing off to the supervisor and CT. Why ? Firstly, sharp supervisors/CTs see through that. (T15)

Practise their 'TP smarts' - do what is required of them by the supervisors, CTs, HOD's to ensure a smooth 'trip', even if it means momentarily stifling their own ideas/instincts. (T16)

Firstly, don't antagonise your CT or supervisor. Once you know who they are, try to find out their expectations of you. (T17)

#### 4.2.3 Hard Work and Commitment ( 11 Comments )

Be prepared to work very hard, especially in putting into practice what you've learnt in the IE - may be the last time that you'll ever have the chance to use them in your lessons  
( a joke ) (T3)

Be prepared to work hard, consistently. (T5)

Need to **work really hard** - sleepless nights, deep thinking and self-evaluation. Tell yourself : every lesson needs to be an improvement from the one before, in order to improve teaching skills. (T7)

'Try till the end ". I would encourage trainee teachers not to give up. It's not going to be easy going through the whole teaching practice. (T10)

Be prepared to work hard during TP. It'll be a good testing ground as to whether you'll be ready to handle the full load (T11)

Be prepared to put your heart and soul in teaching. This is **NOT** a wishy-washy activity. Students can tell whether you're sincere or not. Work hard at everything you undertake - whether preparing, implementing lesson plans, marking, assessing students, searching for materials etc. (T12)

Work hard - the students know who really takes an interest. (T13)

Plan well before each lesson : go through a trial run if you have to ( it builds up your confidence ); have your material ready; never go in unprepared or under-prepared or over-prepared. (T14)

**Start** getting ideas for lessons **now !!** Any gimmicks that can help their lessons should be sourced out and stored away for future, emergency use ( particularly when supervision/moderation time comes along ). (T16)

#### 4.2.4 Open-Mindedness and Flexibility ( 8 Comments )

Be open-minded and ready to accept suggestions/criticisms from supervisors/CTs (T1)

Remain an open and thinking person. Be receptive to ideas but be selective about what you use, how you use it, for what audience and for what purpose. (T4)

Be adaptable - don't expect the situation to change for you. (T11)

Be prepared to learn from other people in the school ( colleagues, CTs ) who have **practical**, hands-on experience of teaching. The realities of good teaching are often **not** dealt that the supervisor will be looking for. (T16)

Also be flexible and learn to think on the spot and improvise. What they don't prepare you for in IE is the type of student you're going to get or the school management and politics you'll inevitably be involved with. Just remember to be flexible, keep your cool and keep learning while you're teaching. (T17)

#### **4.2.5 Confidence ( 6 Comments )**

Confidence matters a lot in teaching because it affects your relationship with your students, your supervisor, your CT and most importantly it affects the trainee himself or herself. (T2)

Be confident of yourself. Do not think of yourself as a trainee, new, inexperienced and therefore you can't do a good job. (T6)

Generally, be confident of yourself. Realize that now you are in the 'working' world and so you are no longer looked after as a student. ( T9)

Confidence, independence, assertiveness, being firm - all qualities that you must **show** you have ( even if you're crumbling inside ) (T12)

#### **4.2.6 Teaching Subject and Educational Theory ( 4 Comments )**

Insight of teaching content. Try to love the content of your lessons. ( T1)

Be familiar with your theory and a repertoire of techniques. They may not solve all your problems but are very useful as springboards for finding solutions. (T4)

#### **4.2.7 Miscellaneous ( 8 comments )**

Further comments related to the importance of friends as allies and confidants; being able to 'have a laugh' ; use of school facilities; clarity of goals.

### **5. Comparison of Group & Individual Categories**

It is apparent that there is a fairly close correspondence between the group and individual categories, as is shown in Table 7, where categories are rank ordered in terms of the number of individual comments recorded.

Table 7

Group Categories	Individual Categories
1=. The Needs of & Relationships with Students	Knowledge & Relationship with students
1=. Relationships with CTs & Supervisors	Relationships with Supervisors, CTs & others
3. Hard Work & Planning	Hard Work & Commitment
4. Personality	Open-mindedness & Flexibility
5. Content Knowledge & Love of Subject	Teaching Subject & Educational Theory

## 6. The Ideal-Type Case

It is now possible to move towards the construction of an ideal-type actor : The Case for Distinction. Though constructed from the above data, the ideal-type is, of course, not intended to be an empirical description of any one of the teachers in the study. It has three components : resources, definition of the situation, and strategies.

### 6.1 Resources

The Case for Distinction draws on a combination of academic and personal resources. Typically she/he is :

- (i) a graduate with at least an Hons 2.2 degree or above, usually in the main teaching subject
- (ii) successful in courses at IE
- (iii) self-confident, humble, articulate and in control

## 6.2 Definition of the Situation

The Case for Distinction identifies success on teaching practice as a managed accomplishment, contingent not only on personal qualities but also on social opportunities to display these qualities and have them recognized. Key aspects of the definition of the situation are :

- (i) successful lessons are a joint accomplishment of the teacher and pupil
- (ii) assessment of classroom teaching is inherently subjective
- (iii) knowledge and enthusiasm for one's subject is fundamental, but this needs to be recognized
- (iii) supervisors and co-operating teachers are a source of inspiration and help but they need to be ' on your side '
- (iii) excellence must be tempered with modesty and commitment
- (iv) success require a great deal of hard work

## 6.3 Strategies

The major strategy of the Case for Distinction student is to seek to control the teaching practice situation by :

- (i) showing concern and interest in students through a policy of 'open negotiation', to win over the students to the teacher's side
- (ii) being flexible, open-minded, and generally unassuming ; intent on learning from more experienced school personnel
- (iii) establishing good working relationships with supervisor and cooperating teacher(s): getting them on your side
- (iv) working hard and being fully prepared
- (v) projecting a confident, professional image, and competence and love of teaching subject.

## 7. End Note

Both quantitative and qualitative data has been used to construct an ideal-typical figure to aid analysis of the processes involved in gaining a distinction grade for teaching practice on a secondary teacher education programme in Singapore. It is apparent from the data analysed so far that age and gender are unimportant but that success on teaching practice is related to academic ability as measured by degree type and the examination results of taught courses on the programme. This finding, if it is construed as a relationship between taught courses and practical teaching ability, may provide some comfort for those engaged in teacher training.

Distinction students score high grades for practical teaching right at the start of teaching practice, though there are individual exceptions to this. Given their academic backgrounds, it is not surprising perhaps to find them recording their highest grades for the planning, evaluating and communicating roles, these being the roles that draw extensively on subject knowledge. These early strengths appear to be consolidated over the teaching practice, with real gains made in the areas of inducting and managing, though the analysis of this data has still to be completed.

From the qualitative data, it is apparent that the distinction student has a genuine commitment to teaching, is enthusiastic, hard-working and has an obvious concern for the well-being of students. At the same time, however, he/she recognizes that such qualities alone will not guarantee success on teaching practice. In ideal-typical terms, the case for distinction not only has personal strengths, but understands the importance of their being seen and recognized as such as well. Such an understanding leads to the kind of controlling strategies built in to the type.

## Footnotes

1. The 249 students comprised 209 Singapore Citizens, 2 Singapore Permanent Residents, 4 Malaysians, 1 Thai, 3 Brunei and 30 students from the People's Republic of China ( PRC ). Of the 20 distinction students 18 were Singaporeans and are included in the analysis, together with one foreigner for whom a full data set is available. PRC students were excluded from the analysis. Other students were only included in the analysis where 'O' and 'A' level results were known.
2. 'O' and 'A' level scores were computed from the single best examination sittings as follows :  
     'A' Level Score : Best 3 'A' Levels + 2 'O' Levels  
     'O' Level Score : Best 5 'O' Levels

3. Only formative grades were disclosed to the students : summative grades, awarded at the end of teaching practice, were kept confidential. The question of grade disclosure is discussed in L. Sharpe, (1990)

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Leslie Sharpe, November, 1991