
Title	Singapore teachers working overseas: Are they happy?
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Source	<i>ERA - AARE Joint Conference, Singapore, 25 - 29 November 1996</i>

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**SINGAPORE TEACHERS WORKING
OVERSEAS : ARE THEY HAPPY?**

ELENA LUI HAH WAH

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ARE THEY HAPPY ?

by Lui Hah Wah Elena (Ph.D.)

Introduction

In the recent trends of regionalisation and globalisation, Singapore professionals in both the public and private sectors are facing the challenge of working overseas. In this qualitative study, a total of 95 out of more than 120 Singapore professionals in the education service and other disciplines, in Hong Kong, Perth and London, were interviewed by the researcher during her academic(sabbatical) leave from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, from mid-March to mid-June, in 1996. The five open-ended questions used in the interviews cover their professional competence, social adjustment, self-respect, social status, career development, code of ethics and national identity. The main purpose of this study was to find out what do Singapore professionals think of themselves, their professions and nation. The '5Cs' that helped the researcher gain access to the interviewees were: Connecting, Contacting, Confirming, Caring and Consulting. The findings showed that most of the interviewees have positive thinking of themselves, their professional practices and Singapore. This paper focusses on the indigenous data collected from the interviews with 20 teachers working in Hong Kong, 17 of them were primary school teachers posted by the Ministry of Education to the Singapore International School(Hong Kong) and 3 were secondary school teachers employed directly by 3 different private schools.

Singapore Teachers and Other Professionals Working in Hong Kong

Currently over 8000 Singaporeans residing in Hong Kong are engaged in various endeavours, because of their own interest or their employers' business ventures. In November 1995, the 25-million state-of-the-art campus of the Singapore International School (SIS) at Aberdeen, Hong Kong was declared open. In the SIS(HK) official opening souvenir magazine, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented, "The Singapore Government decided to established this International School in Hong Kong in 1991 because it encouraged Singaporeans to invest and work abroad. Singaporeans working abroad have expressed concern that their children may not able to adjust to the Singapore school system on their return. The 6000-strong Singapore community then working and residing in Hong Kong represented the highest concentration of overseas Singaporeans in one place. The large community warranted the setting up of a Singapore-type school."

The SIS(HK) started in September 1991 at a school building in Kennedy Town leased by the Hong Kong Government. Its enrolment has grown from 210 in 1991 to more than 700 in 1995. There were 28 classes, ranging from pre-primary to primary six, managed by some 40 teaching staff

comprising Singapore teachers who were posted by the Singapore Ministry of Education on a 2-year contract and teachers from Canada, China, U.K., U.S.A. and other countries. Since its bilingual curriculum (English and Chinese) has gained popularity in Hong Kong, many parents of other nationalities were attracted to enrol their children in this school.

With the kind cooperation and assistance of the principal and staff of the SIS(HK), 17 Singapore teachers were interviewed in the first week of academic leave. All of them impressed the researcher that they were happy with the posting in SIS(HK) though they actually had longer working hours. They spent more time in the school to interact with pupils and parents and to prepare teaching materials. Most of them liked the four seasons climate in Hong Kong and the conducive working environment at SIS(HK). They also had high morale, good quality, commitment and respect in their professional practice. In regards to social and cultural adjustment, they seemed to have less difficulties as compared to those Singapore teachers interviewed by the researchers in Perth, Australia. Actually, majority of the professionals interviewed in this study in Perth were either immigrants or post-graduate students. Their backgrounds and exposures were very different from the Hong Kong cases.

The common concern among these teachers were the lack of suitable in-service training or continuing education courses. Some of them took their own vacation leaves to attend in-service courses in Singapore in order to keep abreast with the latest development in their teaching subjects. The courses offered by the Education Department, the Institute of Education and universities in Hong Kong were meant for the local teachers and conducted mainly in Cantonese. Many Singapore teachers could not master Cantonese well enough to follow the lectures and discussions in these Hong Kong in-service courses.

In the second to fourth weeks of the academic leave, 23 interviews were conducted by the researcher with some help from the Singapore Association in Hong Kong and her networking with Singapore professionals. Three of these interviews were Singapore teachers directly employed by private secondary schools. Two of them went to Hong Kong more than 10 years ago because their husbands decided to work there. The third case gave a rather unique reason for working in Hong Kong, i.e. to experience the climate and culture that are different from Singapore. The other 20 interviewees worked in a variety of disciplines including finance, legal, health and social services, engineering and marketing. Most of them enjoyed working and living in the Colony and had no problem in social adjustment. Their language and dialect proficiency really gave them the competitive edge in the business world and earned them great admirations from the locals. They were proud of their nation and professions. Generally speaking, people in Hong Kong had good impression of Singapore professionals, education system and clean environment, but many of them were of the opinion that Singapore is "a place with no freedom".

Suggestions for Singapore Teachers and Other Professionals

Based on the advise given by her interviewees, the researcher would like make the following suggestions to the Singapore professionals: (i)

to know more about working and living overseas through seminars/workshops; (ii) to participate in the 're-entry' adjustment programmes for professionals when they return to Singapore; (iii) to be equipped with cross-cultural learning skills to help themselves and their families adjust better in foreign countries; (iv) to maintain contacts with their colleagues and professional associations to keep abreast with the latest development in their professional practices; (iv) to engage in self-directed and distance/open learning programmes by various means of communications, e.g. electronic mails, facsimile transmission, video conferencing, etc.; and (v) to 'remind' their employers of their need for continuing education (in-service courses) and recognition of their attainments in professional development.

Generally speaking, all the Singapore teachers and other professionals interviewed were happy with their overseas postings or ventures. One common factor for their 'survival' or 'success' was: "Having an open mind". This mind-set has really led them to cope more effectively with various changes, uncertainties and adversities, especially in their initial adjustment in a foreign country. Perhaps, this is a crucial factor in all pleasant experiences and successful endeavours in any social context, at home or in 'a home away from home'.

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