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THE DEVELOPING TEACHER:
REASSESSING CLASSROOM PRACTICES

presented by

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INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of information technology and the sharp increase in societal expectations, the roles and duties of the teachers continue to expand progressively with each passing day. Indeed, teaching has been a demanding profession as it requires a range of skills and knowledge. The teachers are expected to help the students acquire the

range and type of information and skills that they need to know in order to be better equipped to respond to a host of issues and to meet the challenges of the next decade. There is no doubt that caring and competent teachers are vital to the success of the educational reform process. It is also equally important that pre-service and in-service teacher professional development must also be prepared to change so as to equip teachers to meet these challenges. It is therefore important for the teachers to have the opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences of classroom teaching and to assess their ability to cope with classroom problems. Only then can planning for development to meet the needs of teachers as individuals, as well as meeting the needs of the schools in which they work be effective.

In 1991, the Ministry of Education in Singapore conducted a study on the teachers activities in the classroom. The sample consisted of 805 teachers from primary, secondary schools and junior colleges. The findings show that, on average, teachers spend between six and eight hours a day on activities that are professional in nature such as classroom contact, lesson preparation and marking, monitoring and counselling pupils and providing individual help for weak pupils. About one hour is spent on other duties like collection of fees, typing, photocopying and stapling of examination and test papers and other duties. Teachers unanimously indicate that demands on them are great and expectations are high especially with the increasing public pressure and focus on education. Though the staffroom capacity and facilities in general are rated low by teachers, the results show that generally, teachers are more satisfied with their non-physical environment like relationships with colleagues.

THE NEEDS OF TEACHERS

Ckris Kyriacou (1991) argues that professionally, teachers need to develop the capacity to cope with change, to update themselves with subject knowledge and experiment with innovative pedagogical skills and strategies. On the personal level, Kyriacou proposes that teachers need to be helped to cope with stress and maintain morale in the face of increasing and sometimes conflicting societal demands. He supports teacher development efforts that encourage teachers to attend courses such as through provision of financial support.

Bradley, Conner and Southworth (1994) suggest that teachers be encouraged to become "reflective practitioners" through their involvement in critical review of practice. They emphasize that schools must provide teachers with opportunities for teachers to discuss, interact with colleagues and to share their ideas with one another.

Bell (1991) reviews different models of teacher development, ranging

from apprenticeship through learning from colleagues as role models, learning through in-service course attendance to learning from school-based development workshops. He concludes that each of these models offer different opportunities for the development of teacher empowerment - from "practitioner choice" to "practitioner control". In addition, what is vital is the process which allows "informed choices about professional development". For choice to be informed, it therefore appears that the concept of teacher development has to be expanded to other facets of teacher development beyond knowledge updating and skill acquisition.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: A FRAMEWORK

The concept of teacher development has traditionally viewed each stage of a teacher's professional life as distinct and separate. Each transitional phase is characterised by "crises" affecting the cohorts of practitioners, beginning with the survival or feeling one's way phase during the first through third years of career experience, followed by the stabilization phase from the fourth through the sixth years of career experience during which time teachers consolidate their pedagogical repertoire and finally the reassessment and serenity or disengagement phase after the seventh year of teaching.

The development framework focuses on both the life tasks or conflicts that stimulate growth or sometimes called the phase theories of

development proposed by Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson and Roger Gould and on the form and structure of sequential development proposed by the stage theorists like Lawrence Kohlberg and Jane Loevinger. The phase and the stage theories agree that the individuals, the teachers, play an active role in determining the course content of their professional growth. They pinpoint to the interplay between self and others, individuals and their environment as fundamental areas for growth. To understand the potentials for teacher development in schools, teachers and schools must be examined.

This paper highlights the need to make a paradigm shift towards reconceptualizing teacher development in a more holistic way by viewing the development of a teacher from being a novice to becoming an advanced practitioner. As teachers gain experience and become more seasoned, they become more confident and more competent as they develop a repertoire of skills and knowledge that complement staff development efforts. According to Smylie and Conyers (1991), professional development organized according to this view requires shifting the teachers away from the traditional dependence on external sources for the solution to their classroom problems towards self-reliance in instructional decision making. Teachers are encouraged to be responsible for their own professional growth and to pursue life-long

learning. Zimpher and Ashburn (1992) believe that such a strategy will help teachers to better understand and to cater to the diverse needs and background of students.

Focus of holistic professional development should be more on the development of more generic skills like analytical thinking and reflective learning with the objectives of sharpening teachers' skills in problem-solving, determining student needs and conducting action research that will help to develop teachers' knowledge and strategies related to school and classroom practices. In order to enable practising teachers to reflect on practice or to conduct research, teachers need to be provided with more opportunity and time to reflect.

This paper reports on an exploratory study that attempts to encourage a group of 646 primary, secondary and junior college to examine their beliefs, knowledge and experiences and to evaluate their own development as professionals. Conceptually, this research involved a mixture of psychological and psycho-sociological framework applied to questions about the development of the teacher. This explanation of the lives of the teachers is influenced by the conceptualization of Erikson (1980) on the emergence of self and one's search for identity. In addition, the author was influenced by the work of Michael Huberman (1989) on the "Lives of Teachers". It is clear from literature that teacher's previous life experience and background shape their view of teaching and their perception of their ability to cope with the demands of teaching. On the conceptual level, the authors were curious to see if the life cycle theory of development is applicable to a specific group of teachers in Singapore.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper will report on a small part of a funded research project on the study of teacher development in Singapore. This study provides some insights into the lives of teachers in Singapore and information on perceptions of their work. How do they rate their ability to cope with the school tasks at different stages of their career? How do they relate to the pupils they teach? What are their perceptions of the general behaviour of the pupils? Do these perceptions influence their liking for the pupils? Do they pursue professional development

courses? The paper highlights the ways in which practising teachers in the schools are developing a repertoire of skills and knowledge that complement staff development efforts. Specifically it is an attempt to determine the nature of problems that teachers encounter in their initial and subsequent years of teaching in the classroom, their perceptions of their ability to cope with classroom problems as they arise and strategies they employ to deal with the teaching-learning problems.

The following are some of the research questions that the research project attempts to answer:

(a) Are there phases or stages in teaching? Do a large number of teachers progress through the same stages or struggles during their career paths? When do teachers encounter crises in their career?

Do teachers perceive themselves as becoming more competent with the years of experience? If so, in which areas of pedagogy do they develop their competence?

(c) Are the teachers aware of their feelings towards the pupils and the strategies they use to deal with discipline and learning problems in the classrooms?

(d) Is it possible to identify the factors that contribute to the development of teachers' professional career?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research on the professional life of the teachers employed the survey of a representative sample of the teacher population via structured questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study consisted of 52 questions of a diverse nature. The questionnaire included both very focused closed-ended questions and semi-directive open-ended questions. Some of the open-ended questions were deliberately general in scope and invited the respondents to elaborate fully their lines of response. Other open-ended questions required the respondents to explain and to justify their responses and often to give examples.

Characteristics of the Sample

The study sampled only teachers who had been attached to the schools for at least a year and were employed as full-time qualified teachers. Teachers from all subject-matter disciplines were sampled. The sample composed of 646 teachers (143 primary school teachers or 22%; 333 secondary school teachers or 51.7% and 170 junior college teachers or 26.3%) from 14 schools in Singapore.

The participating teachers represented a cross-section of the teaching population. Ranging from primary to junior college level, they taught a spectrum of subjects and have served from 1 to over 30 years in the teaching profession. Both males and females (31.4% male teachers and 68.1% female teachers) of all races, and single and married teachers were considered in the study. Table 1 contains the summary statistics of the teachers.

It is interesting to note that results indicate that in the teaching profession, there appear to be more older teachers (56.8% of teachers are above 36 years of age) than younger teachers (only 26.5 % of the

teachers are below 30 years old); more female teachers than male teachers; more teachers of Chinese ethnic background (523 teachers or 81.1%) than other ethnic background and more teachers who are married (404 married teachers or 62.6%) than those who have never been married. Although the distributions by age, sex, ethnic background and marital status are unbalanced, the results are expected as they are very close to national statistics. However, it should be of concern that the teaching profession appears to be more successful in retaining the older teachers than the younger teachers. The age of the respondents varies from 24 to 60 years old. Almost 60% of the respondents or 387 teachers have taught for more than ten years in the school.

Another interesting indicator is that only 9.7% of the respondents were assuming added responsibilities in parallel to their teaching duties. Among the respondents who had successfully achieved promotional status were principals (two principals responded to the questionnaire), vice-principals (nine persons) and heads of departments (53 persons).

Table 1. Summary Statistics of the Teachers and Classroom Characteristics (N=646)

DESCRIPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Type of School		
Primary School	142	22.0
Secondary School	334	51.7
Junior College	170	26.3
Age		
24 and Below	48	7.5
25 - 30	123	19.0
31 - 35	97	15.0
36 - 40	76	11.8
41 - 45	75	11.6
46 and Above	216	33.4
No Response	11	1.7
Sex		
Male	203	31.4
Female	440	68.1
No Response	3	0.5
Ethnic Background		
Chinese	523	81.0
Indian	47	7.3
Malay	42	6.5
Eurasian	6	0.9

Others	17	2.6
No Response	11	1.7
Marital Status		
Single	225	34.8
Married	404	62.6
Widowed	4	0.6
Separated	1	0.2
Divorced	6	0.9
No Response	6	0.9
Highest Acad Qualification		
"O" Level	110	17.0
"A" Level	124	19.2
Bachelor's Degree	77	11.9
Master Degree	14	2.2
Ph.D	4	0.6
No Response	317	49.1

Table 1 (Contd). Summary Statistics of the Teachers and Classroom Characteristics (N=646)

DESCRIPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Professional Qualification		
Teaching Qualification	574	88.8
Other Qualifications	8	1.2
No Response	64	10.0
Number of Years at Present School		
2 Years and Less	250	38.7
3 - 6 Years	128	19.8
7 - 10 Years	79	12.2
More than 10 Years	188	29.1
No Response	1	0.2
Member of Civic Organization		
Yes	41	6.3
No	578	89.5
No Response	27	4.2
Gainfully Employed in Other Occupations Before Becoming a Teacher		
Yes	116	18.0
No	512	79.3
No Response	18	2.7
Only Breadwinner in the Family		
Yes	110	17.0
No	532	82.4
No Response	4	0.6
Usual Number of Pupils in Each Class		
21 Pupils or Less	33	5.1
21 - 30 Pupils	191	29.6
31 - 40 Pupils	312	48.3
More than 40 Pupils	108	16.7

teachers' stress and feeling of inability to cope well with the teaching tasks.

2. How Are Teachers Coping With Various School Tasks?

Table 3. "How are You Presently Coping with the Following School Tasks"? (N=646)

According to the self-reports of the teachers, it is very heartening that there is no alarming degree of inability to cope with the multifarious school tasks. Teachers seem to be able to handle instructional tasks and make pedagogical decisions very well. On the average, less than 10% of the respondents reported that they were unable to cope with the various school tasks. Further analysis of the findings indicate that latter group need more help in conducting effective Extra-Curricular Activities (7.3%), in organizing appropriate and varied classroom activities to cater to needs of different ability groups (4.8%) and in the management of audio-visual equipment (4.6%). While the majority of the teachers can cope well to very well with the demands of teaching, it is paramount that the needs of the small group who seem unable to cope should not be ignored. Moreover, the situation they point to deserves attention and help and requires further study.

This is supported by their affirmative responses to the question "Do you feel that you want further training in strategies for dealing with those problematic areas?" Thirty-eight per cent or 248 teachers indicated that they want further training in areas of inadequacy.

3. Why are Teachers Encountering Difficulties in Coping with Various School Tasks?

To find out what the teachers perceive to be the factors that contribute to their inadequacy in coping with demands of teaching, the teachers were asked to describe the nature of problems for those tasks that they had not coped with very well.

Some of the reasons given are as follows:

(a)inadequate training,
(b)language incompetence of teachers,

(c)not technically inclined,
(d)poor time management,
(e)pupil factor.

4. Reassessing Classroom Practices: Pedagogical Issues

The theme of self-doubt appears in this study and is not necessarily common to younger teachers. This phase of doubt is a result of the profound reflection during the course of the teacher's career. It occurs especially among teachers who indicated their regret in becoming teachers and complained about the characteristics of the school system.

Table 4 contained the findings.

Table 4. Choosing Teaching and Teachers' Feelings Towards the Pupils (N=612)

Of the 646 respondents, 612 teachers responded to both the question (Question 32) "Do you regret becoming a teacher?" and to the statement (Question 28) "Your feelings towards the pupils you teach may be described as one of ...". Of the 612 respondents, an overwhelming majority or 504 teachers (82.4%) reported that they do not regret becoming a teacher. Out of every ten teachers, only two teachers reported that they regretted becoming a teacher. How would the teacher's feelings about the choice of their career influence their feelings towards the pupils and towards their classroom practices? The teachers'

descriptions of their lives as classroom teachers will be an important measure of the teachers' satisfaction in the teaching profession. Five fundamental pedagogical issues will be discussed in the next section.

4.1 Relationship with Pupils

The findings do not support the misconception that those who might regret becoming a teacher would be more likely to dislike the pupils they teach. On the contrary, even among those who did not regret becoming a teacher, 213 teachers (34.8%) or one in every three teachers described their feelings towards their pupils as one of mixed feelings, hovering between feelings of "like" and "dislike" towards the pupils they teach. However it is a bit disturbing that only about half of the teachers in the sample (52.1%) reported that they liked the pupils they teach and only 8 persons or a negligible 1.3% of the respondents dislike the pupils they teach. What could be obstacles in preventing the development of a more positive teacher-pupil relationship?

Problems of discipline could be one of the pedagogical issues. Table 5 shows that 80 of the respondents or 12.7% described the general behaviour of the pupils as being disruptive or unco-operative. However, it is interesting to note that the teachers' liking of the pupils seem to be positively related to their description of the general behaviour of the pupils as "good" or "helpful". Development of the teachers' mixed feelings towards the pupils seems to be

connected to the negative behaviour of the pupils. It therefore appears that being able to overcome discipline problems and being able to manage the pupils well will affect the teachers' sense of control and liking for the pupils.

Table 5. Teachers' Feelings Towards Pupils and Their Description of Pupils' General Behaviour (N=629)

4.2 Dealing Effectively with Discipline Problems

The teachers reported on a number of classroom management strategies that they employed to effectively deal with disruptive and unco-operative behaviour. Taking into account the idiosyncratic nature of the classes, the following examples reveal some differences in the strategies employed by teachers from the junior colleges as compared to those teaching in the primary schools:

"Threat, persuasion, motivation, counselling." (JC Teacher: ID No. 387)

"Advice, concern, tolerance and help. If they still do not change, approach the head of department for help." (JC Teacher: ID No. 392)

"Personal counselling, using deterrents, for example, some form of punishment." (JC Teacher: ID No. 405)

"Counselling and reward." (Pri. Sch. Teacher: ID No. 572)

"Let them know from the first day of school what you would expect from them. Always lend a listening ear." (Pri. Sch. Teacher: ID No. 577)

"Spell out your expectation right from the beginning of the year. Be firm and fair. Communicate with these pupils often." (Pri. Sch. Teacher: ID No. 592)

"Segregate the unco-operative pupil from the good pupils. Praise him and accept him back as friend only when he has reformed himself." (Pri. Sch. Teacher: ID No. 584)

"Inform the parents. Keep them after school." (Pri. Sch. Teacher: ID No. 586)

"Retained from recess for ten minutes. Stand in class for one period. Only genuine cases for natural recall will be

entertained..."(Pri. Sch. teacher: ID No.589)

"Give "time-out" for children who are disruptive or stand near them or "look" at them to let them know that their actions are being noted by me."(Pri. Sch. Teacher. ID No. 590)

The strategies recommended vary between a more humanistic approach and the more behavioural approach of providing structure and implementing behaviour modification strategies to deal with classroom discipline. The approaches depend on the teachers' own levels of maturity and the grade level of the students. Shouldn't the younger students be taught to think and to take ownership for their own behaviour ?

4.3 Attitude Towards Professional Roles and Professional Development

In response to the question "Are you a member of any professional organization?", it is disappointing to note that only 225 teachers (34.8%) responded that they are members of professional organizations. In other words, only one out of every ten teachers are members of professional organizations. This is a very dismal figure especially in a teaching profession that encourages individuals to pursue life-long learning. Table 6 presents the findings on the teachers' involvement

in professional organizations.

Table 6. Professional Membership and Pursuit of Professional Development (N=646)

Majority of those who reported that they were members of professional organizations indicated that they were members of union-related organisations (28.3%) such as Singapore Teachers' Union, Singapore Tamil Teachers' Union, Chinese Secondary School Teachers' Association. Only 31 teachers (4.8 %) appears to be members of subject-related associations like History Association of Singapore, Singapore Mathematics Society, Art Teachers' Society etc. It is even more disappointing that none of the respondents are involved in a research-related association like Educational Research Association of Singapore.

In response to the question "Do you pursue self-sponsored courses of study on your own time?", 161 teachers or 24.9% responded "Yes." Results indicate that almost only one in every four teachers are pursuing self-sponsored courses to upgrade themselves. The rest of the sample provided the following reasons for their inability to pursue self-sponsored courses to develop themselves professionally:

- (a) "No time",
- (b) "No money",
- (c) "Attending NIE in-service course currently",
- (d) "More concerned with doing an effective teaching job",
- (e) "Not ready",
"Too early in my career".

Teachers need to constantly upgrade themselves especially if they are to play critical roles in preparing the pupils for the information age and being models for the students. In a speech at an old Rafflesian Association dinner on 14 December 1995, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, said, "Character determines whether a person succeeds in life or not. High IQ alone is not enough." He emphasised the importance of other values like hard work, thrift, family and community ties. Teachers in Singapore are expected to play an important part in imparting values by exemplifying character and in reinforcing those values in the classroom. These duties are in addition to the teachers' principal responsibility of "maximising the learning potential" of pupils and helping them to learn and to pass the crucial national examinations

Teachers can play a critical key in influencing the lives of pupils and in shaping their attitudes only if the pupils look up to them and respect them as teachers who are experts in their subject-discipline and in dealing with life's problems. That requires the dedication and the desire to belong to professional organizations and to attend courses and conferences to upgrade themselves constantly. Learning is a never-ending process and teachers are exemplars to the pupils in the learning business.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended:

(a) that new teachers should be given lighter load and a mentor to guide them in their first year of teaching. This will help to ease their transition from student teacher life into the real world of

classroom teaching.

(b) that assistance be given to the beginning as well as to experienced teachers to help them make quick adjustments to the new teaching environment and to be able to adapt to changes in educational policies such as impact of instructional technology; and

(c) that provision be made for teachers to constantly take time off to attend courses and reinstate leave to give teachers time and resources to develop their areas of teaching and non-teaching interests.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The Ministry of Education is aware of the needs of the teachers and the schools. It is heartwarming to note that the Ministry of Education is providing the schools with more resources and more staff to relieve the teachers of routine administration. Hopefully, the step in this direction will enable the teachers in the school to be cope better and to be able to function more effectively. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the critical role of the teachers in the teaching-learning process has to be underscored. It is only when the teachers themselves are convinced of the importance of their roles and are willing to be committed to the learning goal of self-improvement and life-long learning, only then can the teaching profession fulfill the Prime Minister's dream as stated in the Special Teachers' Day Rally on September 1996:

"Yours (Teaching) is a critical profession. You will shape the future of Singapore.

You will determine if the next generation is a resilient and cohesive community,

and produces exceptional leaders to guide Singapore ever forward."

Prime Minister Goh

chok Tong

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