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AN EXAMINATION OF SOME ISSUES THAT AFFECT TEACHERS

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As part of the Master in Arts (Educational Management) degree at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, the researcher examined the expectations and perceptions of teachers on issues that affected them. The researcher, as the vice principal of the school, initiated a series of dialogue sessions with different groups of teachers teaching the same level in the school, with the intention to improve the relationship of teachers with their colleagues as well as the relationship of teachers with the school. This paper presents the findings of this research on what teachers think about two of the issues that are close to their hearts:

- What is an effective teacher?
- What is a 'D' grade teacher?
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Teachers' Perceptions Of An Effective Teacher

Over the last decade there has been a lot of attention, and research on effective teaching and schools (Berry & Ginsberg, 1990). Different scholars and researchers have different ways of expressing their idea of an effective teacher and effective teaching.

Coker and Coker (1982), through extensive research, identified the following key competencies to be prerequisites to effective teaching:

- Instructional strategies
- Techniques and/or methods
- Communication with learners
- Learner reinforcement-involvement

Cruickshank (1990) organised the research on effective teacher behaviours from ten studies (Rosenshine & Frust, 1971, Dunkin & Biddle, 1982, Cruickshank, 1986, Medley, 1977, Gage, 1978, Borich, 1979, Good, 1979, Emmers & Evertson, 1982, Stallings, 1982, Potter & Brophy, 1988) into seven main categories. They are:

- Teacher character traits
- What the teacher knows

- What the teacher teaches
- What the teacher expects
- How the teacher teaches
- How the teacher reacts to pupils
- How the teacher manages the classroom.

In a more recent survey carried out by Zamorski and Haydn (2002), on teachers' perceptions of effective teachers, they classified the data into six categories:

- Relationship with pupils - refers to a teacher's relationship with her pupils such as whether the teacher is consistent, creating a safe atmosphere, knowing pupils and understanding class dynamics, is fair, is approachable, fosters respect, has a sense of humour, has a rapport with the pupils, sees pupils as individuals, involves pupils in suggesting plans, offers feedback, has high but realistic expectations, has an awareness of special needs of each pupil and understands and respects boundaries between public and private pupil lives.
- Teaching skills and techniques - refers to whether the teacher is a good communicator, using a variety of techniques, applies differentiation, considers timing and pace, has routines, can get the attention of the class easily and quickly, has time to evaluate the lesson with the pupils, is well-organised, has the ability to prioritise and whether the teacher can be adaptable and flexible when necessary.
- Expert subject knowledge - refers to whether the teacher has good knowledge of her subject, is always ahead of the pupils in knowledge, can inspire pupils on own subject and whether the teacher takes a wider interest in own subject, not just related to school.
- Relationship with other teachers - refers to the teacher's ability to work or interact with other staff, her willingness to share ideas and to collaborate with others, whether she is constructive and helpful to colleagues and is sufficiently confident to challenge others in school if feels strongly about something.
- Personal qualities and attributes - refers to whether the teacher is enthusiastic, self-reliant, hard working, having a sense of humour, is fair, is able to trust pupils and other staff, is confident of own beliefs and with pupils and staff, has energy, has physical and mental strength, can cope with pressure, is a good communicator and listener, with pupils and staff, can share emotions, is socially aware and has a sense of vocation.
- Access to support - refers to whether the teacher has and uses effective school management processes like behaviour support, has access and use of appropriate resources, has proper 'rooming' and physical space and has access to, and is willing to, engage in in-service training and development.

Context And Methodology Of Study

Jurong West Primary School (JWPS) is located in the western part of Singapore. It is a 'neighbourhood' school in its fifth year of operation. The school has 60 English medium teachers, 17 Chinese, 8 Malay and 3 Tamil teachers. Of the trained teachers, 30.8% are in their twenties, 43.6% are in the thirties and the remaining 25.6% are aged 40 and above. 15.4% of the teachers are male and 84.6% are female. More than 50% of the staff members are new teachers, having less than a year experience.

The sample used in the study consisted of 55 English medium teachers from Primary 1 to Primary 6 in JWPS. There were six dialogue groups. Each group consisted of about seven to ten teachers corresponding to each level.

Each dialogue group met once a fortnight in the Teachers' Lounge. The dialogue sessions started in July 2002 and ended in October 2002. Each dialogue session lasted for about 30 minutes. The objectives for carrying out the dialogue sessions were explained to the teachers:

- To allow each teacher to voice his / her opinions and views
- To allow each teacher to clarify his / her perceptions
- To allow each teacher to give feedback

The procedure of the dialogue sessions was explained to the teachers. The researcher explained that the "check-in and check-out" method would be used. This meant that teachers took turns to share their views and opinions, but this did not have to follow a sequential order. When a person had finished voicing his or her views and opinions, that person would say "I'm in". All the other members would thank the person who had just spoken and the next person would then be allowed to speak. If they shared the same views as the other person, they could add on to what the other person had said.

The following ground rules were set:

- To suspend immediate judgement (hear another person out)
- No interruptions when a person was talking

The topics chosen for the dialogue sessions were topics close to the teachers' hearts. These were issues that the teachers were concerned about as the issues directly affected them. For instance, being an effective teacher or a 'D' grade teacher would determine how quickly they would be promoted to the next salary scale and would also determine how much they would get in terms of performance bonus each year.

The topics were as follows:

- What is your mental model of an effective teacher?
- What is your mental model of a 'D' grade teacher? (performance grade is from A to E, A being the highest grade and E the lowest grade. An E grader is generally rare)

Teachers were given the topic for the dialogue sessions a week before the dialogue sessions so that they could come for the sessions prepared as they had only 30 minutes to present their views and clarify their perceptions.

Analyses And Findings

After analysing the responses, the teachers' mental models of an effective teacher and a 'D' grade teacher were classified according to the following categories:

- Relationship with pupils
- Teaching skills and techniques
- Expert subject knowledge
- Relationship with others
- Personal attributes and qualities

Teachers' mental models of an effective teacher:

Relationship with pupils

- *motivates and monitors pupils effectively*
- *doesn't put students down; does things that can shape and change the pupils' behaviour*
- *able to improve the academic performance of the pupils establishes rapport with pupils*
- *able to win the child over with positive words*
- *develops the character of her pupils*
- *brings out the potential in pupils*
- *knows the needs of the pupils*
- *Establishes rapport with pupils*
- *Has love for students*

Teaching skills and techniques

- *able to improve, adapt and modify according to pupils' needs*
- *able to develop teaching strategies according to pupils' needs*
- *makes a breakthrough for the weaker pupils*
- *makes a complicated concept simple*
- *able to discipline and control the class so that the teacher can teach and the pupils can learn - ensures that learning takes place*
- *able to identify pupils' problems and teach according to needs*
- *designs lessons in an interesting way*
- *makes use of various methods*
- *able to plan the lessons well so as to deliver lessons effectively*
- *able to 'foresee' problems*

- *good in classroom management and innovative*
- *Expert subject knowledge*
- *teaches beyond textbooks*
- *good in subject area knowledge*
- *well informed of latest in education and syllabus*

Relationship with others

- *able to handle parents – gain respect of parents*
- *keep parents informed*
- *able to handle parents and gain the respect of parents*

Personal attributes and qualities

- *identify areas for improvement*
- *knows own strengths and weakness before can teach better*
- *able to handle class despite different abilities of pupils*
- *marking on time to give feedback to pupils*
- *a continuous learner ; continuous upgrading*
- *able to multi-task*
- *able to balance work and family life*
- *one who cares*
- *one who makes a difference*
- *accomplishes given tasks*
- *able to put into practice what one has learnt*
- *has commitment to work and is willing to put in more than is required*
- *able to assess pupils in all areas*
- *a role model*
- *manages time well*
- *has a helicopter view of things and a wider scope of what education is all about*
- *embarks on projects and takes initiative to do things.*
- *goes the extra mile and is not calculative.*
- *able to see the big picture*
- *able to handle all tasks and is able to complete all tasks at hand*
- *good in many areas and volunteers readily*
- *does her best at all times*
- *reflects on own teaching and improves on it*
- *love for teaching*
- *doesn't have to be told to do things*
- *doesn't have to be checked to be on duty*
- *not driven by selfish ambitions, vanity and conceit*
- *has a positive effect on pupils and people.*
- *goes around telling people why they are there.*
- *Has love for teaching*
- *able to put into practice what has been learnt.*
- *Able to effectively manage stress*

Teachers' mental models of a 'D' grade teacher

Relationship with pupils

- *irresponsible*
- *does not care about the students*

Teaching skills and techniques

- *one who lacks confidence and experience in teaching*
- *needs skills, eg. time management to accomplish tasks*
- *poor class management*
- *poor discipline.*
- *teaches the wrong thing – concept to pupils.*
- *no remedial conducted*

Expert subject knowledge

- *content knowledge questionable*

Relationship with others

- *not working as a team ie not a team player - does not cooperate*
- *bad rapport with parents*

Personal attributes and qualities

- *lacks the drive*
- *does not perform up to expectations*
- *needs a lot of guidance, encouragement and motivation from the more experienced peers*
- *does not reflect on his or her teaching*
- *does not have the drive to see it through*
- *doesn't bother much*
- *does the bare minimum*
- *not marking books*
- *do things of personal interest things in class eg. play stocks and shares.*
- *always late when reporting for duties*
- *cannot finish task required on time – even after many reminders*
- *do less than the bare minimum*
- *tries to get out of duties or tasks assigned - thinking of ways to get out of it*
- *pushing to others when supposed to do*
- *doesn't complete task*

- *unable to carry out teaching duties professionally*
- *regularly on MC – affecting pupil’s performance*
- *someone who merely does his or her duties*
- *unwilling to take on responsibilities*
- *poor work attitude*
- *Makes a mess of things.*
- *doesn’t set good example in class*

Discussion And Conclusion

There are a few interesting observations. Firstly, the teachers’ perceptions of teacher effectiveness are concentrated in the category of personal attributes and qualities. This suggests that whether teachers think that a teacher is a good teacher is determined more by who the teacher is and not so much on what the teacher has done, though of course these are not mutually exclusive concepts. Further research into teacher appraisal to determine whether the appraisal process concentrates more on what the teacher has done than who the teacher is will yield rich insights into possible areas of tension.

The performance grades in the teaching service are as follows:

- A: perform beyond expectations in all areas of work
- B: perform beyond expectations in most areas of work
- C: perform beyond expectations in some areas of work
- D: just meet expectations
- E: perform below expectations

It is interesting that some teachers’ perception of a ‘D’ grade teacher is one that should be given an ‘E’ grade instead. This misalignment of mental model is a possible area of tension in the appraisal process. An interesting area for further research is whether there is a misalignment between the mental model of school leaders and that of teachers as to what an effective and non-effective teacher really is.

To conclude, this paper has presented how teachers in a primary school in Singapore perceive an effective teacher and a ‘D’ grade teacher. Hopefully, the insights drawn here will give impetus to research in the areas of teachers’ perception of issues that really affect them.

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