REFLECTIONS ON CONVERSATIONS

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Conversations

The session started off with a teacher saying that there was a complaint from a parent in the Straits Times (30 May 2002) forum page on schools organizing lessons for students during the mid-year holidays. He argued that it would be better for students to rest and relax during this period and perhaps even enjoy holidaying with their parents. Two other teachers felt that students could learn from play or from visits to other places of interests. Another participant said that in her school, they tried to maintain a balance by having a week of lessons (for students with wide ranging levels of abilities) and keeping the remaining weeks free for teachers. One teacher commented that during the holidays, “students should be away from school but not totally away from study”. He opined that the holiday period is an opportune time to teach students to be responsible enough to know how to manage their time.

Reflections

As the conversation went on, I was increasingly uncomfortable because there was not enough evidence and clarity in thought for a fruitful discussion. We do not know, for example, if that one parent’s complaint is representative of other parents. A comprehensive statistical survey with some hard data would be necessary for any conclusive claim. There was also a need to discuss the observation in a broader framework. For example, what exactly is the problem? Is it an issue of who is the significant decision maker in a child’s education? Assuming a child needs the extra coaching in his/her study and we still want to let him/her enjoy the holiday, then how do we re-engineer the situation?

Conversations

Just as I was feeling frustrated, the facilitator did a wonderful twist by asking “So, how can we make the course so salty that the students will be thirsty?” In essence, how can we design learning situations or tasks that will engage the students? He was drawing on the pedagogical implications of the discussion. This brought up another remark from the first teacher who felt that teachers nowadays are already burdened with too many responsibilities. Another teacher
responded by saying that while this might be true, we have to perform our duties from our hearts that care for our students. He called for teachers to be role models. This sparked off another discussion on values. One pertinent question centred on how to teach a value such as honesty when in the real world, it is not valued. The example given was that of a salesman who had to be dishonest to be able to sell his products.

Reflections

I have no doubt that teachers are to be role models. At the same time, values are both caught and taught, sometimes more caught than taught. Also I was very uncomfortable with the proposition that honesty is only valued in the classroom and not in the real world. I do not believe that this is true at all. A salesman who uses dishonest tactics to gain more sales will not have repeat and loyal customers. Honesty is also valued in the real world. It is a fundamental value that most rational beings would subscribe to.

Conversations

Another piece of conversations involved students indiscriminately using handphones in class. In some schools, when the students are caught, the teachers would confiscate their handphones. However, this caused another dilemma. Students would then accuse the teachers of using their handphones. The question was what could be done to address this problem.

Reflections

To me personally, the handphone is not the problem and confiscating it would not solve the more fundamental problem – that of having self-control and being responsible. It might be handphone today and dying their hair with another colour tomorrow. Some suggest that motivating the students to learn might also be a cause. If so, then it is the teachers’ responsibility to ensure that his/her teaching is effective. As I have always said and believed, I do not teach a subject. I teach students that subject. In conclusion the takeaway from the session was packaged in 5 Rs:

- Role modeling
- Rapport
- Right values
- Responsible behaviour
- Real fun (in learning)