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An appreciation or an understanding?

When Mr Leong Chin Toong, the chairman of your organizing committee, approached me about the exact title of my paper on Education for Living for this seminar, the first word that occurred to me was in Chinese "認識", which is roughly equivalent to "getting to know". Mr Leong suggested "appreciation" as the English translation to which I readily agreed. Hence the present title.

However, as soon as I sat down to gather some thoughts about the paper, I realised that perhaps a more appropriate title would be "Understanding Education for Living". To me, appreciation seems to be of a higher order than understanding, for the latter forms a basis for the former. On the other hand, when analysed from a different angle, appreciation involves the affective or emotive component of the human mind, while understanding involves more of our cognitive ability. For example, we talk about an appreciation of art or drama, but we say an understanding of a situation or a problem. For a complex subject like Education for Living, which consists of Civics, History and Geography, certainly it demands the use of our cognitive ability. But at the same time since the subject deals with morals and civics, attitudes and values, it requires emotive responses from us. To cut a long analysis short, it is my sincere hope that the present paper will help you develop a better understanding of the new subject and will lead you to the stage of appreciation later.

What I attempt to do in this paper is to share with you my experience with others in developing this subject of Education for Living for the Primary I and II classes.
The birth of the subject and the objectives

In November last year, it was announced that a new subject in the primary school curriculum had been conceived. And in January this year, the new subject called Education for Living was born, initially for Primary I and II. The subject will be introduced in stages and it is hoped that by next year the textbooks will be ready for Primary III & IV and then in the year following for Primary V & VI. This is a tight schedule by any standard. It was hardly 5 months between the setting up of the Education for Living Committee and the publication of the first two books in 3 language versions, Chinese, Malay and Tamil and the accompanying teachers' manuals, one for each book.

Why Education for Living and what is its content? The answer to the former was already contained in the article that appeared in the second issue of the Teachers' Rostrum (in both English and Chinese). The second question is closely related to the first. At the risk of repeating myself, the four objectives for Education for Living are as follows:

1. To make our pupils fully aware of the purpose and importance of nation-building, and to be conscious of their responsibilities in nation-building as loyal and patriotic citizens.

2. To guide our pupils towards a clearer understanding of our historical background and geographical environment, and the treasured values of both Eastern and Western traditions.

3. To make our pupils understand the relations between man and his social and natural environment, and to help them lead a meaningful and useful life in a rapidly changing industrialised society.

4. Ultimately to help our pupils develop those desirable attitudes, qualities of mind and character that are implied in our education programme as a whole.
It should be remembered that it is not the hackneyed phrases that matters. It is the spirit which informs the subject and the actual practice that should give us the real impact.

There appears to be a sense of urgency about the project. This is so for good reasons. There is a great deal of serious concern about the attitudes, and values of our youth in a modern and highly urbanised setting, and hence education for the formation of right attitudes and values has become an urgent task. For the same reason the planning of the implementation of the project has been aimed at the shortest possible time, after giving due allowance to professional and staffing considerations as well as printing and publication constraints.

The content and the medium of instruction

For Primary I & II, Education for Living is largely Civics. From Primary III onwards, it is an integrated subject combining Civics, History and Geography. Both the content and the approach will be new. It is through the thematic approach that the different subjects are put together. But the main principle underlying the whole project is: Emphasis is to be placed on civic and moral education. To put it more vividly: Civics and morals will appear as the trunk, and History and Geography as the branches and the twigs.

The syllabuses for Primary I & II have been completed and made available to schools. Copies of the syllabuses in English will be handed out to you for your reference. The syllabuses from Primary III to Primary VI are being constructed and will be available for use from next year onwards. The stage of implementation of the project has so far extended to Primary I and II.

The subject is to be taught in the mother tongue. This means that in English-medium schools it is taught in Chinese/Malay/Tamil, and in Chinese-medium schools, it is taught in Chinese, similarly Malay-medium schools, Malay; Tamil-medium schools, Tamil. The rationale for studying
Education for Living in the mother tongue is that it is hoped that pupils will be able to grasp their own cultural and historical heritage better through the use of their own language. Asian moral and social values, and attitudes, such as closeness in family ties, thrift, filial duties and loyalty, can be conveyed and understood better in Asian languages, and the pupils are expected to become more aware of their cultural roots and to foster a stronger sense of nationhood if they know their own language.

Last but not the least, in the context of the present increased 2nd language exposure time in the primary school time-table, to teach Education for Living in the mother tongue would help make the learning of a 2nd language more effective in an English-medium school. In other words, Education for Living serves as another means of achieving bilingual competence in our young people.

How we work

The way we work is entirely based on team work and co-operation among syllabus constructors, editors, writers and administrators. As we are dealing with a new subject, new ideas come out constantly and have to be thrashed out thoroughly during our weekly meetings. The Standing Committee for Education for Living often conduct meetings with the attendance of the editors and writers. It happens frequently that we have heated arguments and discussions on some moral issues or linguistic points. It is through continuous discussion and exchange of ideas that we arrive at a consensus of opinion.

Among the many examples I could give you to illustrate my point, I shall pick out the following few:

Examples:

1. Discussion on how to inculcate the idea of dignity of work and use of our hands.

2. Discussion on whether too much emphasis on safety in school inadvertently breeds a "soft" generation. Discussion on whether we should glorify prize winners or to encourage the mediocre.
4 Discussion on whether it is good to make much use of the fact that a child wants to be liked and to be approved by others.

5 Discussion on how to make the illustrations more representative of the houses or flats or way of life of the masses of people.

On the problem of the texts, every lesson is scrutinised and criticised by the Committee as to its content and presentation. Only after everybody is satisfied with it then it is finally approved. It will be interesting for you to know that in an enthusiasm to make the reading easy and fluent to the children, the Committee seemed, unintentionally to have introduced a lot of rhymes to the Ia and IIA books. Sometimes we were surprised to find ourselves capable of writing nursery rhymes!

e.g. 早睡早起身體好 and 你画画
洗臉刷牙天天要 and 我唱歌
學校生活多快樂

Now we are dealing with higher classes and we want to diversify the modes of expression in the text.

We try our best to keep the language simple and easy to read, with the aim of reaching the CL₂ child rather than the CL₁ child. The vocabulary is carefully controlled, progressing from the easy to the difficult. And wherever possible, attempts have been made to refer to levels of difficulty in the CL₂ books.

Variety of Approach

We use a variety of approach in conveying morals to our pupils. Both direct and indirect methods of instruction are used. For the very young, we make sure that the textbooks are suitable for their interest and ability with interesting texts and lively illustrations. Each lesson has a moral to convey - sometimes it is done by direct indoctrination and at other times by story-telling and by examples from everyday life. After each unit, there are sets of pictures of specific situations for children to see and think, with captions like "which is right?" or "is it
right to behave like this?" Within our limitations, we attempt to teach moral education according to psychological and ethical principles.

Each textbook is accompanied by a teachers' manual. The manual is meant to be a guide to be used by the teachers. For each lesson, the objectives, teaching methods and teaching outcomes are clearly specified. Till recently, not every Education for Living teacher has a copy of the teachers' manual and subsequently we sent out another circular to encourage teachers to purchase and make full use of the teachers' manuals. The situation has improved since.

Some Problems

The main problem lies with how well the teachers teach the subject. Whether the whole Education for Living project will succeed or not depends largely on the teachers. It is not enough to have a set of good textbooks. Civic and moral education cannot depend on textbooks alone. A host of factors are involved: the teachers, the principals, the school, the parents and, of course, the pupils themselves. To come back to the teaching of Education for Living textbooks, in spite of our caution, it was discovered that, as expected, some teachers teach Education for Living as a language lesson, and a bad language lesson at that. Copying 10 lines of words in each lesson, or adding words to the pictures where there is a scarcity of words, is the very thing that we so desperately wish to avoid in the instruction of Education for Living. Our education has become so 'wordy' that our teachers cannot teach without words or without word drills.

What will be done

The two books have been out for more than two months now. How are they received by the teachers and the pupils? Are we getting the result that we expected? Has the teaching been effective? Maybe it is still too early to have any conclusive remarks about the books. But we have just initiated a survey among a sample of 66 schools with over 500 classes teaching Education for Living. We wish to get feedback from the teachers
at the end of the term to find out their opinions about the textbooks and
the teachers' manuals and to identify problems and difficulties. It is
hoped that on the basis of the feedback, we shall be able to modify and
revise the books for future editions. Later in the year, workshop
sessions will be held for teachers to discuss and exchange experiences
on the methodology of teaching Education for Living. It is hoped that through
a variety of means, we shall improve the quality of the textbooks and
hopefully the teaching of the subject. We are also aware that moral
education does not stop at the learning of civic and moral concepts.
Ultimately, the real test is the pupils' action and behaviour. Some
thinking is being done as to how best to bring practice in line with
theory in terms of promotion of Education for Living in the schools. Co-
ordination and co-operation between the schools and the project workers
will be absolutely essential if we are to succeed in promoting Education
for Living.

Conclusion

Education for Living is not a project for a section of the schools
only. Right from the very beginning, it was introduced to all primary
schools. Therefore whatever merits or demerits the projects have would
be shared by all. It is all the more necessary for us who are involved
in the project to be alert for weaknesses and be receptive to good ideas
so as to improve the textbooks.

There has been much publicity and comment from the public con-
cerning the project. The project being under close scrutiny of the public,
we are deprived of the privacy normally accorded to an experiment in
curriculum development. I earnestly hope that understanding and support
will come forth from teachers, principals and other colleagues in the
profession without whose help we shall not be able to progress in our work.
Finally, Education for Living is not an examination subject in the primary school. The success or failure of the teaching of the subject can be felt fully only after 20 years when the present generation have grown up. It is from their attitudes, their outlook on life, their action and their behaviour that we may arrive at some final judgment.

For the time being, may I appeal to you to give all your support, moral and professional, to help make the teaching of this subject a success. Please remember it is our children, our society that are at stake. Your assistance in the form of ideas and suggestions will be most welcome.

Thank you.
LIVING PROBLEM

THE Parliamentary Secretary (Education) raised some important questions on Monday about the teaching of a subject that will have a significant bearing on the kind of Singaporeans our schools will turn out in future. The Education for Living (EFL) course introduced last year in primary one and two consists chiefly of civics and moral education, with the addition of history and geography from primary three. Using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, it is an experiment intended in large part to "place" the pupil in the society in which he lives, teach the values that have traditionally sustained his ethnic group, and imbue him with those values commonly cherished by all. A major aim of EFL is to develop an individual able to discern the valuable and permanent from the irrelevant, or harmful, and ephemeral. Not a small order, and Mr. Ahmad Mattar drew attention to several reasons why it will not be so.

In setting out to impart some understanding of the pupil's cultural heritage and the history of his people, the purpose is to provide cultural ballast. For the individual who knows his beginnings has a self-assurance that the deculturised pupil, who has not been able to identify what he has learned with his own social and cultural background, lacks. But in stressing his roots, there is risk of falling into the other extreme of accentuating differences and perpetuating the cultural chauvinism that is not compatible with our multi-racial society. How can EFL develop confidence without keeping the young Singaporean a prisoner of his cultural ties? Similarly complex problems for both teacher and pupil arise from attempts to select the more desirable aspects of Western culture and to modernise thought and action without discarding tradition wholesale. If home and community do not support what EFL teaches, confusion is compounded.

But that support will not come unless parents and others out of school with influence over schoolchildren understand what EFL is about. That should be no problem when this generation of primary school pupils are old enough to become parents — and if EFL stands the test of time. For the present, educationists must give some thought to how home and community may be oriented to supplement EFL in school. This should include the question of what role religious instruction can and should play. The call by the Deputy Director of Education (Development) to non-EFL teachers to help in promoting moral and social education reflects the spirit of the whole exercise. But how individuals are to translate good intentions into sound guidance for the young is a matter that requires preparation and understanding. Workshops such as the one this week for Malay and Tamil-stream EFL teachers help. What does not help is that teachers from these two streams have had no training yet — by way of in-service courses — to prepare them for such a vital subject.