Pastoral care for young children

Esther Tan

PASTORAL CARE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Esther Tan
Institute of Education.

The Concept of Pastoral Care

At its simplest, pastoral care can be defined as "organized care in the school involving all the teachers in a developmental programme addressing the needs of all the pupils." Although the term "pastoral care" is a relatively new one introduced to Singapore schools only in recent years, the concept of care in schools is not new at all. In fact, for many decades care and concern for the welfare of pupils have always been given due recognition in Singapore schools. Some schools have set up pupil welfare programmes to meet both expressed and identified needs of pupils while in other schools, selected teachers double up as student counsellors to identify and help pupils in need. However, one has to admit that in the past, the preoccupation with providing a good academic education aimed at attaining excellent examination results has tended to eclipse the guidance and welfare aspect of education.

Since care and concern in schools is not a new concept in Singapore, what then, is new about Pastoral Care? I would like to highlight three characteristics that distinguish the current practice of Pastoral Care from the Pupil Welfare programmes of the past:

The first of these is the shift from a reactive approach to a proactive approach. Pastoral care is developmental, a caring programme designed to facilitate, to enhance and to enable the total development of the child, not just to supplement, to intervene or to rescue in times of need and crisis. Because of this proactive and developmental nature, pastoral care is not something reserved for badly behaved pupils or the underprivileged. It is for all pupils regardless of their ages, stages of development and their developmental needs.

The second important feature is the common use of the group approach in the delivery of pastoral care in schools. Because of its developmental nature, pastoral care is best delivered through a series of planned group guidance activities whereby young pupils attain learning and growing in a conducive, tension-free atmosphere. In other words, under the guidance of their pastoral care tutor and in the security of a caring school community, the pupils learn and grow together through fun and participation.
The third important feature is the whole-school approach in pastoral care. In the past, pupil welfare programmes in schools usually involved a handful of teachers only, who would work with a selected group of pupils, usually those identified to be having some learning difficulties or behavioural problems. Now we are talking about concerted efforts amongst the whole school staff to plan and implement a developmental programme which enhances the quality of school life and facilitates the growth of all pupils. The ultimate goal is to ensure that every pupil in the school community feels wanted and valued as an individual. Besides enjoying a sense of belonging, they are also given opportunities to develop their full potentials in all areas of their development regardless of their age, abilities, social and cultural background.

The Introduction of Pastoral Care to Singapore Schools

The introduction of pastoral care to Singapore schools was first recommended by a group of twelve secondary school principals after a study tour to the U.S. and the U.K. in 1986. Having studied the pastoral care programmes in British schools and the guidance programmes in the U.S., these principals concluded that although academic standards in Singapore schools are high compared to world standards, guidance for pupils had not been given adequate attention. It was recognized that although the educational objective of imparting knowledge to pupils and preparing them for examinations is important, the long-term goal of preparing children for life and producing self-confident, caring and useful citizens of the future can never be over-emphasized. One way to realize this important goal, suggested the principals in their report entitled Towards Excellence in Schools (1987), is pastoral care in the schools. They felt that a comprehensive pastoral care programme would enhance the school environment as well as "provide for the personal growth of each child through individual guidance and the close monitoring of progress". This would ensure the total development of the pupils and maintain a balance between the pursuit of academic excellence and educating our pupils for life.

Following these recommendations made by the principals, the Ministry of Education set up a Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Section which, to date, formally introduced pastoral care into 48 secondary schools (17 in 1988, 12 in 1989, and 19 in 1990) through a pilot scheme. Meanwhile, the Institute of Education responded to the new challenges by planning and mounting on a large scale in-service training programme for the teachers of these schools to prepare them for their new role as pastoral care givers.

Although to date pastoral care has been formally introduced to only about one third of the secondary schools in Singapore, there are plans to phase in the remaining schools. In the meantime, several primary schools have also taken advantage of
the training programmes at the Institute of Education and have initiated pastoral care programmes on their own accord. As a result of their enthusiasm, more than 3,000 teachers have undergone basic training within the past three years and about 100 are receiving advanced training to prepare themselves as leaders of pastoral teams in schools.

Pastoral Care – Singapore Style

A review of the scenario in Singapore schools show that in most schools with a formalized pastoral care programme, usually a needs survey is done to ascertain the needs of the pupils before aims are identified and a "pastoral curriculum" drawn up for implementation. This means that the specific objectives and the resulting programme may vary from school to school. For instance, in a school of low academic standing where many pupils lack confidence and motivation, the main aim of pastoral care may be to promote learning through building up self-esteem and teaching study skills. In another school where majority of the students join the work force soon after completion of secondary school, career guidance becomes a major component of the pastoral care programme to teach the pupils life skills and prepare them for the world of work. In yet a third school where many children from broken homes act out their frustrations by misbehaving in schools, the priority in pastoral care becomes one of building a positive self-concept and teaching interpersonal skills. But whatever the emphasis, all the pastoral care programmes in the schools share a common feature, namely, the provision of time and opportunity for pastoral care tutors to interact with the pupils, and, through a progressive programme, build up a trusting relationship with them to promote self-confidence and to facilitate self-awareness. Such pastoral efforts are also concerned with the modification of the learning environment, adapting it to meet the needs of the individual pupils so that every pupil has the maximum chance of success, whatever his background or general ability. Thus no effort is spared to ensure that every pupil leaves school equipped with the necessary skills and supported by the right attitude to enable him to derive the maximum benefits from life as well as to contribute to society.

The Structure

In most of the schools, the whole-school approach is adopted in the delivery of pastoral care. This is often done through involving all teachers in a vertical house system or the horizontal year system. The vertical House system organizes the pupils into groups called "houses", each under the care of a Head of House assisted by a team of tutors. The horizontal year system groups pupils according to their age or level and are looked after by tutors under the organization of a "Year Head".
Role of the Tutor

Whatever the pastoral structure, all schools recognize the importance of the role played by the pastoral care tutors who serve as the first point of contact for the pupils. These pastoral care tutors (usually form teachers) are expected to implement and promote pastoral care activities through informal interactions with pupils placed under their care on a regular basis, either within or outside of curriculum time. Their main responsibility is to know their pupils well, to promote relevant social skills and to care for each pupil's personal and academic progress.

The Pastoral Curriculum

In all the schools in the pilot scheme, pastoral care is delivered through the implementation of a "pastoral curriculum" which is sometimes called "Personal and Social Education". This pastoral curriculum comprises a series of planned tutorial activities tailored to meet the specific needs of pupils and delivered through structured group activities such as group discussion, workshops, role play, values clarification activities and simulation games. Examples of themes forming Personal and Social Education courses are:

* The pupil's place in the school
* Relationships and interpersonal skills
* Communication skills
* Thinking skills, decision making and problem solving
* School work and study skills
* Health and hygiene
* Vocational interests and career planning

Besides the specially tailored pastoral curriculum, pastoral care can also be delivered through enrichment programmes (residential or non-residential), pupil profiling, home-school relations, academic guidance, peer support, management of discipline, pupil counselling, extra-curricular activities as well as co-curricular activities.

A Pastoral Care Programme for Young Children

The Rationale

Although a decision was taken to give priority consideration to older children in secondary schools in the provision of pastoral care, I would like to argue that since pastoral care is proactive and developmental in nature and scope,
actually it would be more sensible to introduce it at the primary school level. As pointed out by Nelson and Snow (1988), there are many features of primary education which have special relevance to the personal and social development of young children. Some of these features are:

1. The general organization of the school allows children to spend a long period of time with an adult or a small number of adults.

2. The general acceptance by the primary class teachers of their role in the all-round development of the children placed in their care.

3. The basic form of class organisation. In many primary classrooms the children work in small groups, a condition very favourable for conducting group guidance.

4. The children spend most of their time working with other children they know well.

5. Much attention is given to the creation of an attractive personal environment by, for example, displays of the children's work.

6. Parental involvement is much greater in the early years of schooling.

Such accepted practices in the primary school render it an ideal place for the implementation of pastoral care to facilitate the growth and maturation of young children.

The Goals

Pastoral care is often delivered through a Personal Social Education programme in the schools. The aims of this programme may vary according to the age group and developmental needs of the children. For young children in primary schools, the following are appropriate aims for a PSE programme:

Personal

* to enable each child to feel valued, respected and cared for
* to increase self-awareness
* to enhance self-esteem
* to enable each child to be aware of his/her feelings and to express them
* to enable each child to experience success
* to create a secure atmosphere where each child can learn to cope with disappointments and failures

Social
* to encourage cooperation, sharing and caring
* to encourage mutual respect
* to encourage children to listen to each other
* to encourage children to be friendly to each other
* to help children appreciate and accept differences between each other - sex, race, religion etc.

Moral
* to provide opportunities for children to make choices in everyday situations
* to develop strategies with children for problem-solving
* to develop techniques with children for resolving conflict situations
* to encourage the children to be aware of their own intentions and the intentions of others
* to provide opportunities for children to exercise responsibility and trust

Some Group Guidance Activities for Young Children

To achieve these stated goals of pastoral care, a child-centred, activity-based approach will be the most appropriate and some examples of such activities are suggested below -

Activities to facilitate Adjustment to Pupilhood

For a child, starting school is probably the most challenging adjustment he has to face so far. The transition from home to school can be upsetting, even traumatic for a child. He has to leave the warm, intimate and secure environment of his home to take his place in a large, confusing and strange place called "school" where he is expected to cooperate, to compete and to achieve. Whether he likes it or not he is being conferred a new status, that of pupilhood. How well this transition from home to school is effected can determine the child's acceptance of school and all that it has to offer. To assist the transition stage, the first contacts between home and school need to be handled sensitively and thoughtfully to lay a secure foundation for the child's school adjustment. The methods adopted by schools will vary but can include some of the following -
a) Invite the parents to visit the school prior to admission and at the beginning of the term, possibly at an informal gathering to acquaint parents with the organisation of the school and to get to know the class teacher and each other.

b) Some class teachers may want to make home visits to the new entrants.

c) In the first week of term the school may want to adopt a staggered admission system and operate vertical grouping or family grouping where older children help the new ones settle in and provide good models.

Activities to Create a Conducive Learning Environment

As mentioned earlier, one main goal in pastoral care is to create a caring community which is conducive to teaching and learning. Glasser identifies four characteristics of a conducive learning environment:

1). People are courteous (when there is mutual respect)
2). Laughter is often heard (indicative of a tension-free atmosphere)
3). Communication is open (when children are both seen and heard)
4). Rules are reasonable (when there is balance between care and control)

The central figure in such a happy picture is the teacher himself whose very presence has an impact on the children’s learning and development. Whether this influence is positive or adverse depends very much on the teacher’s own self-concept, his attitude and personality as illustrated by these words of Gr. Haim Ginott in his book "Teacher and Child".

"As a teacher I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized."
Activities to Enhance Self-esteem

We all know that children are greatly influenced by the adults with whom they come into contact, first parents and family, then teachers. These "significant others" play an important role in the formation of a child's self-concept. Thus it is of paramount importance to create a secure framework in school where each child feels wanted, respected and useful. When children are valued, they learn to value themselves and each other. This can be achieved through simple gestures on the teacher's part - calling them by their first names to show that they are individuals, not just "boy" or "girl"; giving them a special greeting in the morning as they come through the door and acknowledging their good behaviour with affirmations and praise accompanied by caring gestures.

Apart from such daily interactions, it is also possible to conduct specific activities in groups with the children which are specially designed to enhance their self-esteem. Two of such activities are described here.

The "Me" Box.

In this game, a shoe box is wrapped in colour papers to form the "Me" box into which the child is encouraged to place pictures, drawings describing himself or objects he values. He is then encouraged to share the contents of his "Me" box with his friends in the group.

"I CAN can."

This activity is based on the principle that visible "achievements" help to enhance self-concept and increase self-confidence. Thus each student is encouraged to decorate a metal can and place it on his desk. As individual skills are learned and mastered, they are recorded on pieces of papers which are then placed inside the can. Every now and then, the child is encouraged to shake out the slips of paper to take stock of the skills he has learned. Such an activity builds up self-worth by giving the child a sense of achievement.

Following the same principle that visible achievements enhance self-esteem, the teacher should provide an audience for the children's achievements so that their work has a sense of purpose. The teacher can spend a few minutes at the beginning or at the end of a session to encourage the children to look at what each other has done. This way the children are taught to value each other's work. Another alternative is to organize weekly sessions for the children to share achievements.
Discussing teacher's role in enhancing the self-concept of pupils in the classroom, Purkey identifies eight ways of enhancing self-concept in the classroom: — teacher can do:

**Challenge:** Show confidence in the children and maintain an "I know you can do it!" attitude. It is important, however, to present the children with the challenge only when chances of success are good.

**Freedom:** Allow the children opportunities to make decisions where appropriate and give them some freedom of choice.

**Respect:** To earn respect from his pupils, the teacher must first demonstrate respect for the children.

**Warmth:** A warm and supportive classroom atmosphere helps to foster in the children a sense of belonging.

**Control:** When the teacher makes his expectations clear to the children, his efforts to maintain discipline in a firm but caring manner will become more acceptable to the children.

**Success:** If the teacher focuses on effort put into learning rather than outcome of learning, the children will be able to experience success in whatever they do and feel worthwhile.

**Activities to Develop Communication Skills**

The cliche "Children are to be seen not heard" is no longer valid in our modern society if we want to bring up confident, happy and well-adjusted children. In fact it is vital to set aside time for children to listen and to be listened to. To develop communication skills in young children, the teacher can use structured listening activities. Sometimes, taping part of the session and playing it back or providing transcripts of the conversations can be an effective way of encouraging free and open discussion. The teacher can also use games to engage the children in open discussion. One such game, called the Circle Game, is an effective way of encouraging children to develop listening and speaking skills e.g. a good news circle when children take turns to share "my good news is . . . ." a listening circle "I can hear . . . ." (after a period of silence).

To help the children develop interpersonal and communication skills, it is important to give them time and space to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of creative activities, especially paint, clay, fabrics, puppets, poetry and drama etc. One teacher put aside a
contact time once a month for her Primary three children to
get together and organize activities to present to the
class. To her surprise the children came up with a variety
of activities ranging from role play to quizzes, telling
jokes and demonstrating the yo-yo. The children took full
responsibility for everything they did, both as performers
and in learning to be part of a responsive and positive
audience, giving feedback and showing appreciation.

Activities to Promote Cooperation and Social Skills

Class and group activities can take many forms from full
cooperative games such as jigsaw puzzles to cooperative
projects - making books, models or pictures, or simply
working on a problem or an idea together. In each of these
activities, everyone involved plays a part in bringing about
the end product. This is often followed by a presentation or
a discussion. There are also many other types of games that
help children to learn empathy of and sensitivity to other's
feelings.

Activities to Develop Decision-Making Skills

Many opportunities for decision making arise from everyday
classroom organization - for example, allowing the children
to choose activities in play situations and language
activities. When they have finished a task, encourage them
to choose another one without asking. Often they need the
security of a further suggestion, but if the teacher
persists with this method, some children would begin to take
initiative by saying "I've finished my .... can I do....
now?" When doing pair work or group work, let them choose
their partner or team members instead of assigning them.
Enabling children to make simple choices at an early age in
a safe environment can be the foundation for making more
important choices later.

Teaching Children Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution

More often than not, a poor self-image is at the root of
many conflicts; if children do not feel positive about
themselves, it is very difficult for them to feel positive
about others. If we can establish a spirit of affirmation
and a sharing, supportive community, conflict can be
reduced. In the area of problem solving and conflict
resolution research has shown that the most effective way of
dealing with this is to use classroom situations as they
arise. When a conflict arise, stop the class and discover
together with the children what is happening. Ask them for
suggestions how the conflicts can be resolved. After a few such brainstorming sessions, some children get the idea and can start sorting out conflict situations for themselves.

Alternatively, role playing is a valuable way of encouraging children to put themselves in other people's shoes and to explore different ways of thinking and behaving as well as finding solutions to problems. For instance, in looking at playground problems, the children can be encouraged to role play situations such as how to join in a game, how to refuse entry into a game without causing upset and how to resolve conflicts without asking the teacher on duty to intervene.

**Parental Involvement and the Home-School Link**

Many teachers have come to the realization that educational opportunities are enhanced for pupils and staff when the teaching relationship is a real partnership between teachers, pupils and parents. For the partnership to be real it is vital that the participants can have some measure of control over the activities. Children should be involved in planning their own learning. Parents should be involved in their children's education. There are many ways of involving parents, from an informal chat in the school canteen to a formal interview a parent to discuss his child's progress.

**Conclusion**

This paper is intended to be a stimulus for thinking about pastoral care for young children — an area that is recognized to be important but also frequently taken for granted.

Most primary teachers would agree that much of what they do in school concerns the personal, social and moral development of children. It is usually not difficult to persuade them that this is an important dimension of their work. What may be harder is to convince them that personal and social abilities and skills are best acquired as a result of careful, thoughtful planning. In other words, personal and social education should be an explicit dimension of the primary curriculum and this is best done through implementing a pastoral care programme in the school.
References


Ministry of Education (1990) Pastoral Care - A New Focus (A handbook for Principals and Teachers), Singapore: Ministry of Education.


