

# **Voices from the Normal Technical World – An ethnographic study of low-track students in Singapore**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ten years have gone by since the first batch of Normal Technical (N(T)) students started their secondary school education. This project examines the N(T) students in the present day. It focuses on aspects of social structure within an N(T) classroom and the interaction that results from this structure.

Following a study done by Chang et al. in 1994 and published in 1997, few studies have been done which focuses on the recipients of planned program. Chang et al (1997) examined the motivation, self-esteem, study habits and problems of the first cohort of Normal Technical students in 1994. The results of the study indicated that the most outstanding problem faced by the Normal Technical students was the inability to understand lessons that were taught in school.

This paper presents initial findings from an ongoing ethnographic study carried out among Normal Technical students from a secondary one class in a typical neighbourhood school since the start of the 2005 school year. Assertions about the social organization of the classroom and how this relates to teacher-student interaction provide us a window into some of the classroom management issues and conditions for learning that emerge in the N(T) classroom. Specifically, this paper focuses on the perspectives of the students in the program. The 'silent' lot, although a minority, is a group of students that needs to be helped so that they can become productive and contributing individuals to the society at large. They need to be given equal learning opportunities to enable them to maximize their learning potential.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In an early video (Ng, 1993) by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore introducing educators to the new Normal Technical (henceforth N(T)) Course that was going to be implemented the following year, the profile of students who would be channeled through this course was described as:

- Good working with their hands
- Short attention span
- Creative
- Work best in groups
- Willing to learn

Presumably, this profile was based on teacher observations of students in the Monolingual/Extended stream that was predecessor to the new course.

In an effort to better understand the learning needs of these students, a team of academics led by Assoc. Prof. Agnes Chang from the National Institute of Education (NIE) set out in 1994-1995 to gather baseline information on the motivation, self-esteem, study habits and perceived classroom environment as well as problems and anxieties that the early cohorts were having. Included in the 1997 report were also teachers' perceptions of these students and their roles. The study was administered using two questionnaires on a sample of 481 N(T) versus 76 N(A) (Normal Academic) students & 88 teachers. Analysis and interpretation of the statistical breakdowns yielded the following conclusions:

N(T) students had

- 'average' self-esteem which decreased as they move to the second year;
- 'average' academic achievement motivation and poor study habits;
- poor command of English leading to inability to understand lessons;
- teachers find them to have short attention span; and
- preference for less critical teachers who provide structure for the class.

Accordingly, the report recommended among others, that

- 1) the curriculum be reviewed to ensure relevance for these students; and

2) help students to improve their language competency.

### ***Rationale***

Since then, local literature that has been written on N(T) students has been largely quantitative and aimed at understanding and meeting their academic needs in specific subjects. Unfortunately, the quantitative survey method lends itself to the generalisation of the normal technical subculture, which leads to blanket solutions that do not do justice to the diverse individual experiences of schooling. This paper explores the social organisation of one normal (technical) classroom in a neighbourhood school through the lens of ethnography. It is an effort to dispel the stereotypical perceptions of these students that are more often than not based on hearsay; it seeks to present firsthand accounts of students' actions – their behaviours and meaning interpretations within a particular context that could ground policy and theoretical discussions on 'what to do' with educationally 'at risk' children locally. As advocated by Erickson (1986, p. 130), ethnographic search *"is not for abstract universals arrived at by statistical generalization from a sample to a population, but for concrete universals arrived at by studying specific case in great detail ... The task of the analyst is to uncover the different layers of universality and particularity that are confronted in the specific case at hand."*

This paper also aims to shift the spotlight away from the elite and cast urgent attention to describe the experiences of the lower-end recipients of planned program. In a rapidly changing educational landscape in Singapore, many of the recent educational reforms seemed to be geared towards the higher ability students. Reforms in 2004 like the integrated program, the changes in the bilingual policies, the university entry requirements and the education of the elite all seemed to focus and channel attention and resources to the needs of the better academic performers in society. There is little effort in changing and examining the way less academically inclined students learn. For example, more resources are channeled to the professional development of teachers teaching gifted children than teachers teaching normal (technical) students. An entire division is set up to look into the teaching and training of students and teachers in the gifted education program but none is available to look into the education of the normal technical students. Also, sharing sessions and conferences are organized for teachers and students in the gifted fraternity but the voices of normal technical teachers and students remain desperately unheard.

The unevenness of distribution of resources and attention given to the teachers and the students involved in the normal technical program prompted this study. Understanding the child and also what interaction occurs in a normal technical classroom will help policy makers, curriculum planner and teachers plan effective lessons to teach the children so that they can make positive contributions to the society.

### ***Background on Normal Technical education***

The N(T) Course was conceived in part to cater to the needs of different ability learners. The stream was established in 1994 to reduce the school dropout rate and to provide at least 10 years of general education to the lowest scoring students (approximately 15% or 7000 students) of each cohort (Ministry of Education, 2000). The government saw the need to equip students who are less inclined to academic studies with "the requisite skills and attitudes to enable them to contribute to the national economy" (Ng, 1993). The policy intent of the Ministry of Education (henceforth, MOE) is thus to prepare these students for further vocational & technical training at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) after they have completed 4 years of secondary education, so the curriculum is focused on strengthening students' foundations in English and Maths. Students take English Language, Mathematics, Basic Mother Tongue and Computer Applications as compulsory subjects and go on to offer 5-7 subjects in the GCE 'N' level at the end of the fourth year.

To keep the students in school and motivated to learn, the curriculum is designed to focus more on practice-oriented learning, perceived to be more in line with N(T) students' approach to learning (MOE, 2000). A review of the N(T) curriculum took place in 2004. The objective of the review is to allow for greater choice and flexibility, to meet the learning needs of the students and to maintain links and access for the normal technical students. The key changes recommended by the review includes provision for normal technical students to offer normal academic subjects, a revision of the normal technical curriculum in the content that are taught, the introduction of elective modules and the revision of the progression structure (MOE, 2004).

Expectations for Normal Technical students to perform academically are very low. "They just have to sit for 'N' level exams to go further to ITE. Even then, only 80% proceed" (Ser, 2004). Since they

cannot be demoted to a lower stream, students who do not pass their end of year exams simply repeat the year. If they keep failing, they are eventually “advanced” to the next level at the discretion of the school for being “too old” for that level. Despite the possibilities for lateral transfer to NA stream, only the top few N(T) students qualify. Nevertheless, the gap in curriculum between ‘N’ and ‘O’ levels is too wide to make lateral transfers a success. (Kang, 2004, p. 151)

At the time of writing, we have not been able to locate the statistics for the racial composition of N(T) students, but streaming appears to promote intra-ethnic segregation (Kang, 2004, p. 162) due to usage of Mother Tongue as opposed to English and perceived differential statuses between students from the lower and higher streams. The impact of a disproportionately large percentage of Malays (boys as opposed to girls) in the stream is no small concern for the future of that community and also warrants closer examination.

### ***The school site***

In October 2004, the school’s Principal invited a team of CRPP researchers to work closely with teachers on curriculum innovation for the incoming batch of N(T) students. The project is an interventionist one aimed at improving teachers’ pedagogy and motivating students to learn. The school is a typical neighbourhood one located in an old housing estate in the western “heartland” of Singapore. It is a government school that accepts both male and female students. The school is single session, with lessons starting from 0740 hours to 1400 hours. It has a student population of 930 and teaching staff strength of 56, excluding the principal and the vice-principal. Its vision is to build an inviting school that brings out the best in everyone. Its mission is to maximize the potential of each individual through quality education and partnership (school’s website, 2005). The school attracts students from all the races in Singapore and hence offers three mother tongue languages, namely, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

The school also offers three streams of study, ranging from Express to Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical). It takes in students with slightly less than average T-score for the Primary School Leaving Examination. The average T-score of 2004 Secondary 1 students for express stream is 201, while that of N(A) is 161 and that of N(T) is 136 for students coming from EM1/2 and 85 for students coming from EM3 stream. The highest T-scores for PSLE is usually in the range of 285 – 289. This puts the school in the rank of those slightly below average based on the intake of students.

Besides a rigorous and varied instructional curriculum, the school also offers a wide range of co-curricula activities for the students. Some of these include netball, volleyball, wushu, sepak takraw, boys’ brigade, girl guides, the national police cadet corp, the national cadet corp, scouts, the red cross, band, choir and others. Judging from the awards they have garnered for the school at national level, volleyball and wushu seem to be “status” sports at the school because players are often excused from class to attend competition. The school also offers special programs like intellectual and psychological profile study, communication skills and structured life skills program to all its students.

In sum, the school is well managed and has clearly stated vision and mission. It has the necessary resources, like dedicated teachers and supportive principal to carry out the planned curriculum and to provide its students with all the best learning opportunities available.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study are a class of 40 Secondary 1 students from a typical neighbourhood school in Singapore. There are 11 girls and 25 boys in the class. All the students take one mother tongue with 32.5% of the students taking Chinese, 55% studying Malay and 12.5% doing Tamil. 25% of the students come from an EM2 course in their primary school and the other 75% of the students come from the EM3 course in primary school. The range of PSLE T-score for the class is from 76 to 151. For the first time in many years, this Normal Technical cohort averages a T-score of greater than 100. In this way, the cohort is an “atypical” one for the teachers of this school. The cut-off point to qualify for the Normal (Academic) course at Shuqun is a T-score of 159. The school strongly encourages students who qualify to go into the higher ability stream classes if given a choice. Although their average T-score is higher than previous years, none of the students in the study had the option of pursuing their secondary education in a higher stream. 10% of the class are repeat students, with one dropping out of school since the beginning of the school year.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collected for this study include classroom observations comprising baseline coding of pedagogy using the Singapore Coding Scheme (2005, henceforth, SCS), ethnographic fieldnotes on day-to-day actions in the classroom and meetings with teachers, audio and video recording & transcripts, SES survey and focused group discussions. We started the study at the end of last year, attending staff meetings and working with the teachers in designing curriculum innovations for the incoming batch of Normal Technical students. Once the school year started, we collected baseline data on different subject teachers' pedagogy using the SCS. Thereafter, we chose to follow the class under the Science and English subject teachers for the rest of the term, sitting at the back of these classrooms writing field notes which we validated through feedback from the teachers observed. 4 other researchers covered the subject areas of Social Studies, Math, Design & Technology/Home Economics and Computer Applications (CPA). The novelty of having researchers at the back of their classrooms during each lesson faded as students got increasingly used to us and our equipment. Researchers were also incorporated into the class timetable, where we had the opportunity to lead the class in Lifeskills activities for two hours a week. All these helped us to become regular and accepted faces at the school.

All classroom sessions were audio recorded and the pertinent parts transcribed. Video was later used in the second term as heuristics to help the teacher examine their teaching practices and enabled us to add post-notes. The SES survey is triangulated with school-level data obtained from the Vice Principal. The focus group discussions on their aspirations and how students perceive their lessons and authority figures in the school were conducted over two sessions in pre-assigned groups of five at a time. With co-operation of the teachers and support of the Principal, we did not encounter any problems collecting these data.

### ***Data Analysis***

As the classroom observation data grew, we started looking for themes, patterns and ideas in students' behaviours in the classroom. This was the first phase of interpretation/analysis-in-the-field. Obviously the findings we present here are emergent as we continue with open coding on incoming data. We lumped analogous instances inductively to form key categories. Assertions were developed from these categories. We collected all the evidentiary instances to support the assertions. Where discrepant cases exist, we considered different interpretations or hypotheses and weighed their admissibility using confirming and disconfirming evidence. If the discrepant case stands, we then revised the assertions or added sub-assertions. Assertions are cross-referenced and triangulated with data collected from the team of researchers so they stand to scrutiny.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Findings***

Classroom management problems are largely perceived to be one of the greatest challenges of teaching in the Normal Technical stream. However, student misbehaviours can take different forms. Unique to this N(T) class we observed is that there was not, to quote the Head of Science Department observing the class, "*one definite leader of the pack, but several centers of disruption. The teacher has to be constantly on his/her toes to deal with them and this is really very difficult.*"

### ***Multiple Centres of Disruption***

Evidence of the teachers having to cope with the emergence of "several centers of disruption" during the lesson is illustrated by the vignette below, pieced from one English class taught by teacher Michael (names have been changed to protect their identities) on 25/4/05:

8:17am: Michael told the class they would continue what they did last Friday and gave instructions on how to fill in the worksheet with hourly breakdown of programme activities for the event they were planning. The students complained that they could not remember what they planned before. Xiao Ping used this as an excuse to suggest they get together in pairs. Ten minutes later, everybody was still finding their pairs. Dennis did not have a partner. Neither did Jingluan. Peng Hwee moved to join Arun and Shazwan initially. The group of five Malay girls and Hwee Ling in the front of the class was disbanded by the teacher. The noise level started to increase.

8:30: Madeline, the teacher aide, shouted above the din for everyone to write the times on the worksheet first.

The opportunity to get up and move to form groups quickly paves the way for multiple centers of disruption to develop, forcing the teachers to be constantly "on their toes" to deal with them:

Rashid walked over to the back of the classroom where Azam and Zul were working together and deliberately sat on Azam. The other researcher finds a chair for Rashid. Michael chided him for being shameless.

Jingluan now partners with Huda and they write away. Peng Hwee has moved to be with Feroz. Eng Kiat rests his head on the nook of his elbow alone, asleep. Michael walks to him and puts his bag on the floor, trying to get him to start writing. He looks annoyed but does. Madeline takes over supervising him for a while.

Dennis drifts around Yang Ming & Jie Ming's group, disturbing them.

By this time, students have written the times in, but not all have started filling in the activity yet.

Dennis kicks Yang Ming's chair when he rocked it. In retaliation, Yang Ming spits at him, careful that Madeline, who was nearby, didn't see. The table next to him is overturned by Dennis who runs back to his seat. Michael disciplines him (holds up two fingers): "2 warnings!" He also gave Yang Ming a red card for rocking his chair. In the meantime, Yang Ming copied what Jie Ming, his partner, has written. Dennis went back to distracting Yang Ming, sitting on the table which has been righted. Michael tells him not to sit on the table. Madeline stands over Yang Ming & Jie Ming to ward off Dennis.

8:42: Faizal came back from the toilet. Harun and him are writing now. Sallehan, who has been working quietly with Iskandar Ismail in front, calls to Madeline for help. Eng Kiat spins his worksheet around the tip of his ballpoint pen. Hazlina, on the far corner of the room, was looking at some photographs.

8:44: Yang Ming's chair is confiscated by Michael. He kneels and copies from Jie Ming's worksheet.

Faizal & Harun now got up to see Firdaus. Xiao Ping later crosses over the room to do the same and is escorted back by the shoulder to his seat by Michael.

8:47: Ali stands looking out the window for a good minute. He and his partner Sahid seemed at a lost on what to do. Yang Ming and Dennis gesture at each other in some kind of "ultraman" moves.

Hence the lesson proceeded until most pairs finished the work at 8:49am. Since the teachers did not limit the time for this task, students who completed it early became even more restless when they had nothing else to do. The teacher shouted for the class to "quieten down" every 3 minutes till the end of the class, when he finally got them to get back to their own seats.

The above vignette illustrated the randomness in the way in which different students acted up to create multiple centers of disruption in the classroom. Each student could turn into a power broker unto him/herself. The two teachers were kept "on their toes" to attend to all the different demands made by the students.

### ***Negotiation***

When teachers lose control of authority through non-recognition in the first place, or by subversion through mass chaos such as the above, the power void opens up space for active negotiation between teachers and different students. The students negotiate with the teachers, and the teachers also negotiate with the students. Negotiation is defined as the act of conferring with another so as to arrive at the settlement of some matter. The example below illustrates a negotiation episode between a teacher and the class of students. The teacher was trying to negotiate for 'good' behaviour. There is evidently power interplay between the teacher and the students in such situations. In traditional classrooms, the power lies with the teacher to dictate what goes on in the classroom. Here, the teacher seemed to be 'losing' or giving the power over to the students.

The following vignette from a Science lesson illustrates how the teacher is using negotiation to try to achieve behavioral changes in the students:

*Teacher enters the noisy class in the classroom and was getting ready for class. She told the class: "If you keep quiet and listen, you can go home later." The class became a little quieter and lesson started. As they reached an interesting part of the lesson that brought up some interesting science concepts (heating water), the teacher says this: "See, science is so interesting, but we cannot do all these interesting things because you don't know how to behave."*

She threatens to take away privileges from the students should they not behave themselves. Such attempts at this negotiation process work but when used too often, they backfire at the teacher because the students dismiss it as empty threats that have become a norm.

Moreover, students can challenge the teacher's authority by simply refusing to do as told:

*T: Okay, can you do the questions now, both please?*

*S: No need ah...*

*T: Go over there.*

*S: Dun wan lah.*

(From transcript of Mrs Sim's English lesson, 10/3/05)

The teacher can cajole and rationalise with the students all they want, but even the use of threats or promise of incentives cannot make a student comply. In Singapore where teachers cannot use physical force on students, students know that there is not much the teacher can do if they refuse to budge.

In the class under study, students negotiate with the teacher by trying to "bargain down" the terms or manipulating the situation to their best advantage. The vignette and exchange that follows demonstrates how both a teacher and a student skillfully tussled the terms of agreement between them:

8:51am: Mrs Sim has just finished a circle discussion where she got students to generate sentences to describe a picture sequencing exercise. She tells the students to go back to the previous seating arrangement and finish writing. Almost immediately, Dennis announces that he has finished, but he was only on the 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence. Mrs Sim goes over to help him and tells him the next sentence. He doesn't want to write it down.

Mrs Sim: I help you to write.

Dennis: Okay. You write one I write one.

Mrs Sim: That's right. Okay? (Announces to the whole class) I am going to write one sentence for Dennis because he is too tired and he'll write the next one. I write (sentence) 3, he writes 4. I write 5, he writes 6. Okay, I've written my sentence. Your turn. Then the next one, I'll do it for you.

In this way, Mrs Sim got Dennis to do the assignment. Hearing this, other students asked for the same help. Mrs Sim goes around to attend to them. Then,

Dennis: 'Cher, I write already. 'Cher, your turn 'cher.

Mrs Sim (skeptically): My turn? So quickly?

She goes over to see and solicits the next sentence from him before writing it down.

Dennis tries to bargain with her to do more for him: 'Cher, you write one more then I write one.

Mrs Sim: Eh, you said 1-1. We have agreed.

Dennis repeats his demand: You write one more then I write.

She turns it back to him firmly: You write.

Seeing that he was able to get her to accede, he continued,

“cher, you write 3 more then I write.”

Mrs Sim: You can't change your mind. I'm alright with it, but after that, you can't change your mind.

Dennis agrees.

Quickly writing her sentence and returning it back to him, Mrs Sim surreptitiously adds, "It's better to write 1-1 so you get to write, ok?"

Because she was so quick, Dennis had to assent and they continued *her* way, but she made him feel quite special, announcing loudly to the whole class:

“Wah, first time I ever had to write for a student. You are a very lucky boy!” and urging him on: “Let's finish first Dennis, so you and I can be champions, you and I.”

This was a happy situation for both teacher and student, but such negotiation took skill and an even temper on the part of the teacher. Rarely do students automatically assent to the teacher's demands – they “size up” all who come to the front of the class and continuously try to push the limits of the teacher-student relations. Teachers must be prepared to use a set of varying repertoires to get students' attention and deal with students' “bag of tricks.”

### ***Low literacy level***

One significant finding from classroom observations is how students' low literacy level compounds the classroom management problems:

In Lifeskills class, students are given a worksheet to list what should be in the house they have newly acquired. Peng Hwee went up to the teacher and asked for spelling of basic words like 'refrigerator' and 'pet'. Across the room, another student is already calling for the teacher's help loudly. Others are consulting classmates and copying off their worksheets. This scenario is repeated many times in the classroom in other written tasks where the students' weakness in spelling makes them handicapped in completing the tasks. Given that so many of them have the same problem and demand individual attention from the teacher, one teacher, even with an aide, cannot cope with all of them at the same time, hence the remaining students become bored and restless.

To pre-empt students' questionings, teachers rely on "prescriptive" pedagogy, where students' input are limited to filling-in-the-blanks and reproductive knowledge transmission where students are kept occupied with copying answers off transparencies. In the intervention project, splitting the class into smaller groups of about 13 helped significantly in engaging the students as more individual attention could be given to those who need the help and the fewer centres of disruption could be readily identified and managed easily.

Mrs Sim, who was hired by the intervention project to demonstrate different pedagogical strategies that could be used with the students, had this to say at the end of her 10-week tenure:

*I think that the kids are misbehaving in class because they do not have the basic level of literacy. The work may be too difficult for them because they are not able to spell or understand the instructions. That is why it is important for teachers to break down a lesson into bite-sizes that has closure for each small part that will build up to something larger that they can handle. It is also necessary to split them into smaller groups so that we can give them more attention individually and they are less difficult to manage.*

### **Discussion**

This study is situated in two key areas of literature: profiles of 'at-risk' kids and classroom learning environment. The normal technical students are seen as students in the 'at risk' group as they are ranked in the lowest stream in the educational structure of Singapore. However, students are placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development. As the degree of mismatch increases, so does the likelihood that they will fail to either complete their secondary education, or more importantly, to benefit from it in a manner that ensures they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in the next stage of their lives--that is, to successfully pursue post-secondary education, training, or meaningful employment and to participate in, and contribute to, the social, economic, and political life of their community and society as a whole.

The focus of our efforts, therefore, should be on enhancing our institutional and professional capacity and responsiveness, rather than categorizing and penalizing students for simply being who they are. Indeed, Apple (1989) pointed out that if we simply focus on the problems of 'at-risk' kids and dropouts as educational problems, we will make that a problem in itself. There is a need to look beyond the school and explore factors like social class, assessment schemes, unemployment and others as contributory elements to the problem.

Ogbu (1989) in his study on underperformance and dropouts of minorities, suggested looking at the problem of underperformance from the lens of variability in group level as well as individuals. He suggested that it is due to the differences in alignment of communication, coping mechanisms and cultural differences in the minority group and that of the school that leads to the problems of underperformance and dropout. Using the same notion, in the normal technical world, the students' ideas of success, of school, of friendship and of the world at large could be largely different from that of the school and the teachers. In short, they do not see 'eye to eye' on what school life ought to be. This could be the result of the students being cohorted for prolong periods of time in the low-tracked streams. They do not see themselves as being 'at risk' and probably fail to understand why there is a fuss about their performance, behaviour and lifestyles. Ogbu (1989) conclude his work with this:

*"At the moment the definition and explanation of the school adjustment and academic performance problems of the minorities are based on the white middle-class cultural model, not the cultural model of the minorities which influence the latter's school orientation and behaviours. However, such definitions and explanations are incomplete until they incorporate the minorities' own notion of*

*schooling which influences their school behaviour. And until such an incorporation is made, social policies or remedial problems based on definitions and explanations such as those embedded in the dropout literature are not likely to be particularly effective.*” The question brought to light here is: Who sets the agenda for academic performance and behaviour in classroom for this group of students?

Students must buy into the desirability of going to school. Here, Wehlage (1989) raises the important point that school membership requires that the student and the school develop a ‘reciprocal relationship based on an exchange of commitments’. He theorized that school membership is promoted by (1) actively creating positive and respectful relations between adults and students; (2) communicating concern about and providing direct help to individuals with their personal problems; (3) providing help in meeting standards set by the school; and (4) helping students identify a place in society.

In the arena of the classroom, it is important to note the roles played by the students and the teachers in co-constructing an environment for learning. Students learn best in an emotional climate that is supportive and marked by mutual respect (Caine & Caine, 1991). Teachers are in the frontline of the school in dealing with the students and are hence in charge of ensuring that the school membership is promoted by the climate and culture in the classroom. But what needs to be stressed here is that teachers should not take their authority for granted nor expected to achieve the desired environment on their own. Determining the social organisation for learning to take place in the classroom is as much a student domain as the teacher’s. The findings presented above have barely touched on peer interaction between students and the way this affects the learning environment.

As students and teachers work together to construct lessons and to reach instructional goals, classroom management and instructional processes are co-occurring, so the conception of management and instruction as separate domains is a false dichotomy (Weade & Evertson, 1991, p. 136). Helping teachers develop better classroom management systems underlies any successful effort for more meaningful instruction. As students become engaged, self-regulated learners, the teacher's role changes from maintaining control to modeling effective learning strategies and providing instructional support (McCombs, 1996).

Review of the literature has shown that the emphasis on “classroom management” has shifted from the organizational level to the individual learner. Researchers are focusing on increasing their understanding of behavior rather than on expanding ways to control it (Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, & Battistich, 1991). It may be theorised, for example, that students in this class under study are “acting up” because they are trying to build a sense of self, that they are “okay” among their peers. This was clearly illustrated in our findings where students usurp individual bargaining power to distinguish themselves with various disruptive behaviours that demand the attention of the teacher and their peers.

The pedagogy that students in this class are exposed to is largely reproductive transmission of knowledge with highly prescriptive tasks. How teachers work with students in the classroom is shaped primarily by what they believe about how students can best be primed for learning. The result of this pedagogy is that students become passive receivers of knowledge who are expected to conform to the system.

“Effective learners operate best when they have insight into their own strengths and weaknesses and access to their own repertoires of strategies for learning. This type of knowledge and control over thinking has been termed metacognition” (Brown and Campione, 1995). The work on metacognition in the academic arena is beginning to transfer to our insights about how students need to think about their own behavior in terms of making conscious choices about how they are going to learn. With metacognitive awareness, students can actively plan how to learn, monitor their progress, and evaluate their own achievements. To enable students to have a richer and more meaningful school experience, we propose that students be exposed to some form of metacognitive strategies.

## SUMMARY

This paper paints a picture of what a normal technical class can look like. It presents some possible scenarios faced by teachers and students and implications on classroom management and learning. It also took a peek at the students who are the characters in this drama. The information contributes to the literature on at-risk students and underperforming students. It also has implications for policy makers, curriculum planners and teachers alike. Knowing the students, the subculture and the environment that these students are immersed in will enable realistic planning of curriculum, teaching methods and expectations to be placed on these students. The national curriculum, school and teaching should provide the students with an experience that they can identify with and they can remember and learn from. What the

country and the school can provide for these students should not deviate too much from their abilities, dreams and aspirations.

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