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# A Qualitative Study of Singapore Primary School Teachers' Conceptions of Educational Change

Hairon Salleh

## Abstract

*The notion of educational change is no longer new among practitioners, policy-makers and academics in education. Although much has been said and debated in relation to educational change, along with the increase in our understanding of it, the voice of teachers, parents, principals and pupils are, however, rarely heard within the Singapore context. This paper seeks to provide the platform for part of the voice, specifically teachers, to be heard by describing a qualitative research study that was conducted on 19 school teachers from three primary schools in Singapore with regard to educational changes. From the findings of the research, the author will present a conceptual proposal in response to current educational change challenges.*

## Introduction

Since the introduction of TSLN (Thinking School, Learning Nation) in 1997, the education scene has experienced both extensive and comprehensive reforms. This is in concurrence to a global consensus that, "Education has moved up the political agenda . . . is seen as the key to unlocking not just social but also economic problem" (OECD, 2001, p. 48). It would seem to suggest that schools are not sheltered from the external changing world (Levin & Riffel, 1997). On the contrary, schools are rather responsive to both social and economic changes. Globalisation – the way in which the world is becoming more interconnected (Kirby *et al.*, 1997) – has essentially intensified the process of change.

Understanding the rationale for education changes seems to be a natural initial response. Policy-makers have played their part well at conveying this to the general public and school practitioners. However, what have been silent are the voices of teachers in coping with the sea of change. The purpose of this paper is to break this silence through the sharing of local research findings from a qualitative research study conducted in three Singapore primary schools carried out from late 1999 to mid-2000. The research study uncovers teachers' views with respect to change rationale, implementation difficulties, issues and pressures, and teachers'

aspirations. In response to these findings, a key concept proposed by the author is for teachers to take individual initiatives towards collective voice and action in order to develop a greater capacity for engaging in participatory decision-making processes in schools.

## Methodology

The primary objective of the research study was to understand how primary school teachers make sense of the spate of education changes, with special reference to TSLN, NE (National Education) and IT (Information Technology), and the impact of these changes on their professional work and lives. A total of three primary government schools comprising 19 teachers participated in the research study. After access was granted from the Ministry of Education (MOE), school principals and prospective teachers, two focused group interviews were eventually conducted for each school, lasting from one to one-and-a-half hours. Each focused group consists of at least one HOD and at least three teachers. The open-ended interviews are guided by three main questions:

1. In your own opinion, why is the government initiating the recent or current educational reforms or change (initiatives), specifically NE, IT and Thinking School Learning Nation?
2. What are the problems or potential problems or difficulties faced by teachers in implementing these reforms or change?
3. What are the issues or areas that need to be addressed or resolved so that these reforms or change can be implemented more successfully?

The decision to employ focused group interviews was based on the rationale that observations can be made on a large amount of interactions between participants on a topic within a given time period (Morgan, 1997) that provide useful insights into the social contexts that participants live in. The researcher supports the view that "knowledge is neither inside the person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between person and world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 44) and conversation as access to knowledge, which concurs with epistemological philosophies of "interactionism", "constructionism" and "intersubjective interaction". Furthermore, in view of this and the small number of research participants, the author has not adopted the positivist notion of forming general claims based on the findings, although they might be suggestive of reality using the notion of "relatability" (Bassegy cited in Bell, 1999), where findings from one source of data can be used to understand what might occur in other similar situations.

Taking into account of inherent weaknesses of focused group interviews (Hedges, 1985), the research was informed by notions of "procedural objectivity" as opposed to ontological objectivity (Eisner, 1993) and "authenticity" as opposed to reliability (Silverman, 1993), and qualitative validity espoused by

Maxwell (1992):

- descriptive validity (the factual accuracy of the account, that it is not made up, selective, or distorted);
- interpretive validity (the ability of the research to catch the meaning, interpretations, terms, intentions, situations and events, have for the participants/subjects themselves, in their terms);
- theoretical validity (the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to the research);
- generalisability (the view that the theory generated may be useful in understanding other similar situations);
- evaluative validity (the application of an evaluative framework, judgemental of that which is being researched, rather than a descriptive, explanatory or interpretive one).

In terms of analysis, the author adopted Kvale's (1996) approach to interview analysis related to phenomenology: meaning condensation, meaning categorisation, meaning structuring through narratives, meaning interpretation and *ad hoc* meaning generation.

For each focused group interview, the whole interview transcript was read through once to get a sense of the whole with the help of notes taken during the discussion process. The "meanings units" as expressed by participants were determined by the researcher by listening through the recorded discussion and stopping at appropriate times to make notes of meaning units. The theme that dominated a natural meaning unit was stated as simply as possible. The subject's answers were read without prejudice, and statements from participants' viewpoints were thematized. Meaning condensation was achieved at this point.

Themes were then categorised to form a meaningful structure – consisting of major themes branching into sub-themes. Quotations in the form of statements or narratives were transcribed and located with respect to position on the tape to be used as evidence in the meaning interpretation when required. This was the meaning structuring through narratives. "Meaning units" were then interrogated in terms of the specific purpose of the research question and objectives, recontextualising them within broader frames of reference – meaning interpretation. The *ad hoc* meaning generation was essentially taken from Miles and Huberman's (1994) strategies for generating meaning – the identification of patterns and themes, plausibility, clustering, making metaphors, counting, contrasts and comparisons, logical chain of evidence, and conceptual or theoretical coherence.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Rationale for Educational Change*

Teacher-participants understood that education changes are the result of changes taking place in the economic and social spheres, especially with respect to the

former in view of the intensification of global competition. Teacher-participants indicated support for the political move in educational change in the light of economic survival and social cohesion. Teacher-participants supported the view that domestic economies are experiencing greater exposure to foreign competition (Reich, 1991).

*The fact . . . if Singapore doesn't change, it will not progress (economically). It will be in danger of losing it to the neighbours . . . Economy will be the main issue the government is focusing on.*

*If you do not bring all the changes, then the country will be left behind.*

### **Implementation Difficulties**

Analysis of focused groups interviews indicated that there were integration problems at both the classroom and school sites. The attempt to integrate critical and creative thinking, NE and IT posed a threat to the academic achievement of pupils. These reforms not only fight for time in the already tight curriculum, but also contradict the salience of academic achievement, which is intimately related to the nation's bedrock ideology of meritocracy. Teaching basic literacy and numeracy using IT was perceived as much less efficient than whole class teaching. Furthermore, IT was seen to be extraneous and mainly to promote creativity as opposed to improving academic grades. The infusion of NE concepts – to be integrated across subjects, was viewed as interruptions to effective teaching towards academic achievements. Underlying these concerns is the issue of time.

*. . . In primary one, they have 7 periods . . . 6 periods especially if you are a subject teacher. By the time you go into class, 30-minute period becomes 20-minute period. If you are the first period teacher, everyday you have twenty minutes of 6 periods only (per week). How to cover the P1 syllabus? And on top of that . . . if 2 periods of IT, NE, Thinking Skills, how are we to cover the Math syllabus in primary one with 7 periods only? . . . We are superhuman beings (laughs).*

Teacher-participants were more concerned with time resource than physical resource as time shortage had an effect on the use of resources. In the midst of complexity of change, resources are not well organised (Levin & Riffel, 1997).

*Resources are not properly used because we don't have the time to use them.*

Another source of the integration problem is related to incoherence in the translation of policies to practice.

*Teachers do not see the coherence of it, though it is coherent . . . The three initiatives or more . . . desired outcomes, school excellence model, IT. They are actually one thing. Unless teachers and principals see the coherence of it, most of us think that it is haphazard . . . The problem could be communicating the vision.*

This incoherence, which could be a by-product of the top-down efficiency model that the civil service values, is in concurrence with the observation that past failed reforms had been linked to teachers not being involved in the generation of policies (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992), and hence policies not being well understood at the classroom level (Caldwell, 1997).

### **Increased Work Pressure**

Reforms had broadened the roles and responsibilities of teachers which eventually translate to increased multiplicity of teachers' work.

*Adopt a park . . . community work . . . old folks . . . it adds up to too many things we have to do.*

Increased workload lends itself to increased work pressure. Besides trying to integrate thinking skills, NE and IT into the curriculum, teachers had to cope with changes with other MOE initiatives such as SEM (School Excellence Model) and IPW (Inter-disciplinary Project Work).

*You want to do well in everything. You want a hand in everything. It's quite difficult in that sense, and teachers feel overworked.*

Furthermore, each initiative brought in additional administrative work such as form-filling, meetings, resource materials and collection of money. This implies that teachers need to use time after school to cope with increasing demand for time. One teacher spoke of how she had to conduct extra classes after school in order to complete the syllabus as certain initiatives require the use of curriculum time.

Another salient issue was increasing parental demands, which further compounded the pressure on teachers. The stress lay in meeting increasing parents' concerns and demands for standards on pupils' academic achievement on the one hand, and coping with the increasing onslaught of MOE new initiatives on the other.

*I tell you why the teachers do more; because the parents expect more. And they are worried more about parental complaints . . . Teachers are more or less targets. "Why the teacher did this worksheet and this worksheet? This teacher is lazy." . . . for a parent every piece of work must be done because they bought the book . . .*

In order of degree, the key sources of pressure that had been indicated by teacher-participants were time shortage, too drastic changes, increased parental demands, increased administrative work, negative effects on personal quality of life, large class size, and low pay in relation to workload.

Existing structures such as the ranking of teachers within schools had further compounded work pressure.

*You know you are being observed. Every minute. Every movement of yours. . . . You are not at ease. You are not yourself. Just for the sake of ranking, you could not do whatever . . . I don't feel at ease.*

### **Teachers' Aspirations**

In the midst of the struggles that teacher-participants had expressed in relation to education changes, three types of aspirations were picked up – competence in teaching, pupils' academic and social development, and the need for autonomy.

*No matter how much we have in school, when we stand in class... Ultimately... when they do well... When the results show, the money won't pay... somehow you are rewarded somewhere... although I may not be very happy along the way.*

*Now we want... to be more creative, more innovative. Then we should have more freedom... our superiors believe and trust in us that we will do our job, our own way.*

Day (1997) and Sarason (1996) could be correct in suspecting that policy-makers had overlooked the need to build rather than destroy the self-esteem of the profession, and that the professionalism of teachers could also have been ignored in the change agenda. Policy-makers might also have overlooked the day-to-day practical difficulties that teachers face (Sarason, 1996) and favoured a technical view of change (Wideen, 1994). However, the decision to prefer the technical view of change could be the result of the "policy-paradigm" dilemma – that is, to balance the values of equality (parity of opportunity, outcome or treatment), efficiency (tools and techniques capable of producing greater output) and liberty (freedom of choice) (Guthrie & Koppich, 1993). Singapore, being a small nation with limited natural resources, is thus constrained to embrace the efficiency model.

On this note, it is interesting to note that teacher-participants did not think money is a central problem, rather time. The author thinks this assumption could be short-sighted as increase in time would imply increase in financial resources to tasks that free up time for teachers. Perhaps Sarason (1996) is right in stating that "money is not the primary problem now" (p. 381), emphasising that if what has been learned about change becomes interconnected and gains currency, the transformations that will be required will cost a lot of money because contexts for productive learning demand an attention to individuality not feasible in today's classrooms.

Another interesting observation is teachers' silence concerning issues in relation to their relationships with their peers or school leaders, which is due mainly to the singularity of the research instrument (focused group interviews). In this regard, Hargreaves (1994) identified three types of culture that could undermine successful school change – individualisation (teachers working in isolation), balkanisation (formation of political sub-groups that are permanent over time) and contrived collegiality (collaborate for its sake and not for professional learning). Furthermore, a principal's organisational views and leadership styles do have a significant bearing on the school's culture (Kinsler & Gamble, 2001). It is no wonder that culturally based beliefs and organisational patterns have thus become targets of second wave reforms.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion thus far might suggest that change will continue to increase in intensity, extent, complexity (Angus, 1998; Elliot, 2000) and unpredictability. Globalisation has not only transformed, but also compressed time and space

(Giddens, 1999). How schools struggle to manage both "change" and "stability" in a coherent way (Miles, 1998) may persist in years or decades to come, perpetuating the pressure–support imbalance (Fullan, 1991). The increasing demand placed on schools to change is a reflection of not only increasing, diverse societal needs, but also increasing societal belief in the potential for schools to fulfil those needs. The discussion does not, however, suggest a nihilistic abandoning.

Globalisation compels large institutions – which look cumbersome, placid and awkward in the face of increasing intensity, extent, complexity and unpredictability of change to devolve power to smaller units. For example, MOE is gradually giving more autonomy to schools, and thus to school principals, and by recognising that the "one-size-fits-all" model may not fit future schools. Examples of this phenomenon comprise the introduction of Cluster Schools, where clusters of schools are accountable to their respective Cluster Superintendents, and a re-emphasis on Autonomous Schools where schools demonstrating significant value-adding are given extra financial resources. Furthermore, greater recognition of the notion of "contextuality", that each school has unique characteristics of its own and no two schools are alike, is gradually gaining more acceptance across the education service.

Although MOE's attempts to devolve power are praiseworthy, it may be incomplete on two counts. First, devolution could have been more pervasive at the school level reaching to the teacher level, instead of stopping short at the principal level. Second, devolution is essentially technical in nature; that is, to remove bureaucratic red tape. In the author's view, "technical devolution" needs to embrace "cultural devolution" where values of respect, autonomy and trust for individuals are cherished and legitimised.

The key proposition is for teachers' "autonomous status" to be recognised, respected and legitimised. Teachers need to be given the autonomy to exercise their professional judgement in matters pertaining to decisions within the classroom and decisions outside the classroom that impinge on their professional practice. However, gaining "autonomous status" ought to be established through negotiation. School principals need to widen the "field of negotiation" by providing platforms that allow teachers to affect school policies through participatory decision-making, where discussions and debates are valued. Teachers, likewise, need to widen this "field of negotiation" by creating platforms for their voice to be heard to influence school policies. What is proposed is essentially a "top-down and bottom-up integration" (Hargreaves, 1999), and a move towards greater school democratisation (Apple & Beane, 1999; Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 1998).

In situations where platforms for widening the "field of negotiation" are absent or given low priority, individual teachers ought to initiate the move towards greater empowerment and democratisation. However, individual initiatives ought to deliberately translate into collective initiatives and empowerment. This form of empowerment is defined as a "stepping stone from dependency and domination to



a social and political circumstance in which interdependence and the importance of human agency are paramount" (Fielding, 1996, p. 412).

Below is a list of interdependent actions, in order of priority, for teachers to consider in coping with change. Underlying them is the notion of "democraticity" where there is consensus in the collective voice and action of every stakeholder including pupils, parents, teachers, school leaders and communities.

1. *Be rooted in the central calling of teaching, which is the holistic development of the individual child.* Before discussions and debates relating to notions of strategies and approaches are made, there need to be consensus on what ought to be key outcomes of education among stakeholders, which in the author's view is the holistic development of pupils. Teachers need to take time to remember and celebrate their "first love" for teaching.
2. *Connect continual teacher learning with classroom learning.* Teachers need to avoid getting into the trap of reproducing and perpetuating unquestioned practices out of convenience, which dulls the passion to teach and guarantees contempt towards learning. The prevalence of "training" needs to be replaced by "learning" and the notion of "in-service training" to "on-the-job learning", where working and learning are integrated. Teachers could also engage in reflective or action inquiry practice. Learning Circles provided by the Teachers' Network is a viable option where time engaged in action research projects is legitimised as constituting the 100-training hours.
3. *Invest time to nurture collaborative school culture.* Collaboration ought to go beyond mere sharing of resources to sharing of objectives, responsibilities and accountability, so as to break the isolation or individualisation culture. Teachers could engage in peer teaching, peer observations and group marking. In addition, teachers need to build their emotional capital by sharing successes and failures together.
4. *Explore innovative, effective and efficient ways of working.* Teachers should continue to be active and responsible in providing appropriate responses to key issues of time shortage and increasing workload. Workload management cannot simply be about prioritising personal work, but reaching a consensus on what constitute "negotiables" and "non-negotiables" where resources to the latter must be channelled to the former. Innovations to teaching strategies ought to first address these two key issues before they could effectively work. In addition, the use of information technology, which has much potential in solving issues of time shortage and increasing workload, is still under-explored. A case in point is the use of visualisers in classroom teaching, which helps reduce the time involved in writing on overhead transparencies and the whiteboard, and channels this time towards improving the quality of teaching and learning.
5. *Build trust with parents.* As much as there is a dire need for parents to understand teachers' complex work situations, teachers could do much to help

parents understand these complexities, and thus help them have realistic expectations from schools. In addition, parents who are clear about classroom learning processes could complement learning at home. Investment of time in building partnerships with parents would thus not only reduce time and energy in responding to complaints and misunderstandings, but also increase parental support at home and contributions to the school.

6. *Build trust with school leaders.* The impact of school leaders on teachers' work cannot be overstated. They have a significant influence on school policies that shape the structure and culture of the organisation including the degree of autonomy given to teachers, which is dependent on the degree of trust principals have with teachers. However, trust thrives well when teachers demonstrate sincerity, openness and accountability to agreed outcomes of education, and standards of competencies to the agreed outcomes.
7. *Build networks outside school.* The belief that teachers ought to shelter themselves from external events and parties outside school that impinge on their professional practice to minimise workload could be shortsighted. A counter-argument could suggest that certain external parties could provide additional support and resources. For example, teachers from different schools teaching similar level subjects could be linked up via the Internet to share personally made teaching resources and strategies. In addition, partnerships between teachers and university academics could benefit the former in providing theoretical knowledge to add value to classroom learning, and the latter in providing the platform to undertake research projects.

This paper has sought to present readers with an understanding of complexities and dilemmas in educational change. In view of the unpredictability of the future landscape of educational change, the paper has attempted to provide guidelines to help teachers cope with challenges due to change. Nevertheless, the author believes that "once people see themselves functioning in a broader context – even when it is oppressive – they often feel less powerless" (Hammond & Collins, 1991, p. 59). Finally, it is hoped that the discussion had provided the platform for teachers' voice to be heard.

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