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THE IMPORTANCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Review by Levan Lim

INTRODUCTION

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the Singapore 21 Committee in August 1997 to clarify what Singaporeans desire for the future of their nation. The ideas and discussions of this committee were recently published in a book entitled *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference* (Government of Singapore, 1999). Five new ideals were added to the existing ideals of meritocracy, racial harmony, strong leadership and a clean government. They are:

- every Singaporean matters;
- strong families;
- opportunities for all;
- feeling passionately about Singapore; and
- active citizenship.

Embodied in the ideal that every Singaporean matters is that every Singaporean is unique and has a contribution to make to the nation. Thus the latitude for defining success needs to be broadened to encompass the diverse ways people can contribute to and feel valued by society. The indices of academic and economic success can no longer be the sole benchmarks to this new vision of a Singaporean and the Singapore homeland.

To meet the challenge of valuing and celebrating the diverse ways Singaporeans can contribute to society, education needs to take on the role of encouraging individual Singaporeans to strive to be their best. The purpose of this article is to describe the importance and role of encouragement in

education, and to present implications for practice.

ENCOURAGEMENT: ITS IMPORTANCE AND ROLE

For each citizen to be a valued contributor to Singapore, each person's unique gifts, abilities and talents need to be recognised and carefully nurtured so that he or she can be encouraged to find or create his or her place in society and take pride in it. The task of creating opportunities for each Singaporean to contribute in common and unique ways will require pioneering efforts into novel ventures where opportunities for yet unexplored ideas need to be supported and corresponding abilities encouraged. To find one's place in society may require the creation of new roles in order to facilitate the best that Singaporeans of diverse backgrounds can be. An insightful remark made, in *Singapore 21* (p.21) is that "...sometimes, paradoxically, this can be tougher than being what society thinks we should be." The challenge is to encourage Singaporeans to find their niche in society based on their abilities and talents and create new possibilities for themselves and others.

Education plays an enormous part in this process of nurturing the individual, encouraging his or her unique path within society, and providing opportunities for diverse abilities and potentials. Education can help the individual Singaporean to be attuned to his "inner compass"- to be that uniquely precious citizen who can contribute in his own way to society. The challenge for education in achieving the

Singapore 21 vision is not an easy task. The decades of surviving, competing and excelling as an economically viable nation have enabled the nation to prosper, but they have also engendered some undesirable social effects (Government of Singapore, 1999). These undesirable social effects include:

- subscribing to narrow definitions of success and imposing these definitions on others;
- not recognising and encouraging diverse talents and abilities because of conventional norms and definitions of success;
- the fear of failure and risk aversion, and
- expending energy and time conforming to society rather than utilising time for creative and constructive purposes.

These social effects are antithetical to the Singapore 21 vision for they discourage creativity, initiative, the honouring of diversity, and breed a culture of fear and anxiety. Creating opportunities for all Singaporeans so that every person will feel valued because of unique and diverse strengths and contributions require that these undesirable social effects be minimised, especially in the young since they will be ones who can realise the Singapore 21 vision in the next millennium.

ENCOURAGEMENT: PHILOSOPHY AND DEFINITION

Recent changes to the fundamental educational philosophy in Singapore are aligned with the Singapore 21 vision. The desired outcomes of education proclaim the holistic view that education should “*nurture*

the whole child” and “*develop each child’s unique talents and abilities to the full*” (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 1). How can educators unlock and promote each child’s potential and abilities?

A powerful tool educators can use for nurturing and promoting the unique talents and abilities of the young is to *encourage* them to believe in themselves to be the best that they can be. To encourage is to instill courage. Courage frees one to live fully as an active participant of life and is the antidote to fear and anxiety. Courage is the fundamental element in the concept of encouragement. Sweeney (1981, p.50) declares that courage is “*that quality of approaching life which raises one’s consciousness to the beauty all around us, to the intrinsic value in a new experience, or to the satisfaction in making a new discovery, or in the mastery of a new skill.*”

Encouragement is often linked with, but is different, from praise. We often hear praise being used by teachers and parents for providing feedback and rewarding appropriate behaviours, such as “*Good job!*” and “*that’s great!*” Praise is usually given after an act of accomplishing something that meets the standards or expectations set by a person other than the child, such as a parent or teacher. Praise more or less evaluates the extent to which a task or an accomplishment is achieved, and is delivered usually as a product of the achievement. Encouragement, on the other hand, focuses on the process of accomplishing a skill or a task. To encourage is literally to instill or give courage to someone to begin, continue or complete learning a new skill or task through recognising the efforts and feelings of that person in relation to the skill or task. An encouraging word to a student can be

“Looks like you are trying really hard to solve this math problem”. Encouragement is specific to the task and assists individuals to appreciate their own feelings, behaviours and achievements (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). Encouragement has been described as a better motivator than praise for individuals striving for significance within a group (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1984). The advantage of encouragement over praise is that it can still be delivered even if individuals fail to complete certain tasks (Pitsounis & Dixon, 1988).

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

A number of research studies have shown encouragement to be linked with positive outcomes and perceptions across a number of skills for both children and adults. These studies are primarily from the West. The perceived effects of encouragement from parents on their children’s performance in academic and emotional aspects have been examined. Agrawal and Pande (1997) had 500 secondary students complete a parental encouragement scale, and found that high-achieving students received more parental encouragement than both average and low achieving students.

Studies have also examined the impact of encouragement on sports performance. In a study by Chai and Wang (1984), 46 adolescents were separated into two groups who ran a 400 metre race. One group was given encouraging words during the race while the other group was criticised. Both groups of adolescents were told that their performance during the race would be judged on speed and technique. In addition, records of each participant’s past performances on 400 metre races were compared with the present race. The results indicated that the group receiving

encouragement performed better than its past performance while the group that received criticism did not perform as well. Another study investigating the effectiveness of verbal encouragement on endurance performance examined two groups of women in a leg-holding task. Verbal encouragement was found to increase performance for one group by a large margin compared with the other group that did not receive verbal encouragement.

The effects of praise versus encouragement on children’s perception of teachers have been examined by Kelly and Daniels (1997). In their study, these researchers showed a videotape of teachers giving either verbal praise or verbal encouragement to 89 female and 92 male students aged from 9-16. After watching the tape, the participants rated the teachers on a semantic differential scale. The students perceived the encouraging teacher as more potent than the praise teacher. Rogers (1976) states that besides using positive reinforcement such as praise, teachers can be more effective by using encouragement for students.

Encouragement on the part of teachers, as perceived by students, has also been studied. Adolescents’ opinions on how their school learning atmosphere can be affected by encouragement or discouragement were collected by Superstein (1994). In this study, 380 students of lower secondary school age were interviewed regarding what discouraged or encouraged them at school. The results showed that positive teacher attitudes and competence were among the most encouraging factors and conversely that poor teacher attitudes and competence were the most discouraging. Another study revealed that low achieving students may be affected by inadequate



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encouragement. Witty and DeBaryshe (1994) found that some teachers gave less encouragement to low achieving students, while less negative behaviours were shown to high achieving students. These studies illustrate that teachers can learn to be more encouraging through improving their competence and attitudes towards all students.

Apart from students, other members of society have also benefited from the use of encouragement. For example, 23 chronically ill adolescents were interviewed through an open-ended, in-depth interview by Woodgate (1998) as to how health care professionals can best care for them. Eight themes emerged among which were: treat me like a person; try to understand; give me some encouragement; don't force me; and give me options. In another study investigating the nature and support of 58 young mothers aged from 15-21 in achieving their life aspirations, Camarena, Minor, Melmer and Ferrie (1998) noted through semi-structured interviews that access to resources and firm encouragement to pursue their aspirations were supporting features in those who were most resilient.

CONCLUSION

The Singapore 21 vision puts into clear perspective the importance of building a society that values and nurtures the diverse abilities and talents of individual Singaporeans so that they can contribute in common and unique ways. As stated so aptly in *Singapore 21* (p. 19): "*People who fit themselves into more socially acceptable roles are like square pegs in round holes.....the result: a potentially first-rate astronomer becomes a second-rate banker!*" Education can and must play a significant part in redefining the narrow benchmarks of success, creating opportunities for diverse experiences of success and instilling courage on the part of Singaporeans to participate as active citizens in order to create new possibilities for themselves. Individual Singaporeans, especially the young, need encouragement to achieve these ideals. One does not need to look far to encourage. Encouragement can begin within the daily interactions and routines that all of us encounter within schools, homes and society.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- A. Evaluate whether you are a teacher who practises encouraging or discouraging responses, using the table below.

Discouraging	Encouraging
Ineffective listening Focuses on negatives Competing, comparing Threatening Uses sarcasm, embarrassment Disinterested in feelings Bases worth on performance	Effective listening Focuses on positives Cooperative Accepting Uses humour, hope Interested in feelings Bases worth on just being

(Adapted from Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1996)

- B. Use the following specific ways to encourage students:

1. Comment on *what* one is doing more so than with *how* one is doing. Avoid comparing.

Example: That's a beautiful shade of colour you have used for your painting. What did you do to get such a colour?

Versus: I bet no one in this class has as beautiful a colour for your painting as yours (comparing).

2. Focus on the present more so than on the past or future.

Example: You all are really pulling together and spending a lot of time in preparing for your project work.

Versus: If only you all would work cooperatively and this hard all the time!

3. Remark on the deed rather than the doer. Use "I" statements to refer to how you feel.

Example: I really do appreciate your help!

Versus: You are a good boy for helping me whenever I ask.

Or when correcting:

Example: I feel annoyed whenever you interrupt me while I am speaking to someone else.

Versus: You are barging into my conversations – you are so irritating!

4. *Emphasise the effort rather than the outcome.*

Example: Looks like you are working very hard to get these maths problems done.

Versus: How come you haven't finished these math problems yet? Everyone else in the class has completed them.

5. *Encourage intrinsic motivation (i.e., satisfaction, enjoyment, challenge) instead of extrinsic.*

Example: You really do seem to enjoy writing stories of places you have been to.

Versus: Quickly finish writing your school holiday stories for me.

6. *Stress what is being learnt more than what is not being learnt.*

Example: You have learnt about how to tie several knots the past few weeks. In the next few weeks, we shall look at how to put up a tent.

Versus: You want to be a scout? How can you when you don't know so many things yet?

7. *Describe what is being done correctly more than what is not being done correctly.*

Example: You have 12 out of 20 questions correct. With a little bit more effort, I know you will be able to get more correct.

Versus: Wah! 8 wrong out of 20!

(Adapted from Sweeney, 1981)

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