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THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: FROM CONSUMERISM TO TREND-SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Teachers tend to feverishly implement new educational practices that have been introduced. While the wholehearted ground support is necessary for their successful implementation, most teachers have, in the process, become more consumer-minded rather than being trendsetters. Is this a role expected of teachers? If so, what trends can teachers set? What are the critical success factors? This is an ideas paper on the changing role teachers need to play in the 21st century classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The role of education in the success of Singapore cannot be over-emphasized. In his speech at the Official Opening of the National Institute of Education Complex on the Yunnan Garden Campus, the Minister for Education, Rear-Admiral Teo Chee Hean talked about “how each generation turns out depends critically on education. Whether our young have the skills, drive and entrepreneurship to make a living, whether they uphold the principle of meritocracy, whether they love Singapore and are prepared to give their lives in her defence are shaped by the education they receive during their formative years.” This emphasis on education is equally matched by the Government’s action “to increase spending on education from 3.6% to perhaps 4.5% of GDP over the next few years (since 2000), provided the funds are put to good use” (Ministry of Education, FY 2001 Committee of Supply Demand, 15 March 2001, Minister’s First Reply on Schools: “Making an Ability Driven Education Happen”). Indeed, last year (2001), the Ministry of Education’s budget was increased by S\$480 million, “an increase of 8% which is higher than the expected GDP growth of 5-7% (for 2001)” (ibid.).

This increase in spending on education has been used to realize the major initiatives in the education system, to nurture the students in a holistic manner and to prepare them for the

knowledge economy. These initiatives started since the Prime Minister unveiled the vision of “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” to gear the education system towards fulfilling the needs of the nation in the 21st Century. The entire Singapore Education System is now moving towards the ‘Ability-Driven’ paradigm where the emphasis is to “identify and develop the full spectrum of talents and abilities in the students” and “to nurture the whole person and equip Singaporeans for the knowledge economy” (Speech by Dr Aline Wong, the then Senior Minister of State for Education, at the NIE Corporate Seminar, 10 Feb 2001).

Recent developments in the Education System could be broadly grouped under three main areas: infrastructure, content, and people. In the area of infrastructure, schools were brought up to modern standards through rebuilding and improvements under Programme for Rebuilding and Improving Existing Schools (PRIME). In the area of content, the Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Education introduced a more well-rounded and creative curriculum with the infusion of thinking skills and information Technology (IT). However, it is in the area of people (students, teachers, principals and HQ officers) that received the most attention. “The real focus of my ministry for schools this year will be on teachers.... Good teachers are key to all that we do,” stressed the Minister for Education (Ministry of Education, FY 2001 Committee of Supply Demand, 15 March 2001, Minister’s First Reply on Schools: “Making an Ability Driven Education Happen”). Teachers lie at the very heart of education because fundamentally, education is a human enterprise. “It (education) is about people, for people and happens through people...we need good teachers, and enough of them, to do all that we want to do in education” (Ministry of Education, FY 2001 Committee of Supply Demand, 15 March 2001, Minister’s Second Reply on Schools: “Making an Ability Driven Education Happen”).

A BIPOLAR DICHOTOMOUS CONTINUUM

The need for good teachers in the teaching profession and to effect educational reforms successfully is undeniable and necessary. However, defining what constitutes effective teaching or who is the good teacher is altogether another matter. Some writers such as Parker Palmer (1998) wrote about the heart and passion of teaching while others such as Lee Shulman (1986) worked on a teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge. Still others such as Donald Schön (1983, 1987) and Jim Butler (2001) researched on the reflective practice of teaching. It is so easy for teachers to become thoughtless and mechanical in their daily work as heavy demands are being made on them. So, at one end of the continuum, we might have a group of teachers whom I would describe as “consumers”. To me, these are the teachers who, to use a cliché, have lost “their first love for teaching”. They might even be doing a reasonably good job in teaching but it has become a daily “run-of-the-mill” chore. Teaching has become lifeless and “consumer” teachers are not innovators. Neither do they seek continuous improvement (*Kaizen*). They are trading time and energy for a salaried job. At the other end of the continuum, we might have another group of teachers for whom I would like to describe them as “trend-setter” teachers. These teachers are visibly different from the “consumer” teachers in several aspects. With regards to their attitude, the “trend-setter” teachers are life-long learners. They also exhibit an enterprising spirit. In terms of mindset, they are global in outlook and they embrace change. They practise ‘*kaizen*’.

TEACHERS AS TREND-SETTERS

Table 1 below best summarizes the salient features of these two groups of teachers. It is worthwhile to note that these are the two extremes of the continuum along which teachers could position themselves.

Table 1: Distinctive of the “Consumer” Teachers vs “Trend-setter” Teachers

“Consumer” Teachers		“Trend-setter” Teachers
Heart	Lack passion Lack drive	Adopt an attitude of life-long learning Have an enterprising spirit
Head	Resist change Have a parochial outlook	Embrace change Have a global mindset
Hands	Contented with the status-quo	Seek continuous improvement

The trumpet call had been sounded. “We need a first-world mentality – a combination of disciplined creativity and daring enterprise. We can no longer remain efficient copiers, but we need to be daring “edupreneurs” (Keynote Address by the Minister for Education at the Work Plan Seminar on Education in Schools, “Towards Ability-Driven Education”, 5 September 1998, Ministry of Education, Singapore). The Minister for Education also observed that “many teachers in schools all over Singapore are exercising their creative abilities to design quality lessons, many capitalizing on information technology (IT), to make difficult concepts not only easy to understand, but exciting for students as well. The difference between a high quality lesson and a relief teacher reading the textbook line by line through with the class is the application of the teacher’s expertise to produce high value-adding lessons. Just as we have knowledge-based economies and knowledge-based societies, we can also have knowledge-based classrooms and knowledge-based schools” (ibid.). Quoting from a commentary from The Straits Times dated 9 April 2002, “knowledge application (is) the new competitive edge”.

There are already numerous examples of teachers who have become “trend-setters”. One case in point is Madam Tay Lee Kheng, aged 62 who is a firm believer in learning. “Her keen interest in Chinese language and literature has led her to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in the subject at the Open University. She is now in her third year” (The Straits Times, 28 February 2002, p. L15). Madam Tay started as a primary school teacher and having retired recently after 41 years of teaching, she finally got the opportunity that she once missed because she had to work to raise her children. Another example is Dr Ng Ban Cheong. Like Madam Tay, he too is studying his “first love”, Mathematics, at the Open University which is administered by the Singapore Institute of Management. Considering the fact that he is already 70 years old and has accumulated three degrees (with his current study of Mathematics being his fourth degree), there is much truth in the old adage: “you’re never too old to learn” (ibid). Although these are only two cases, there is something about them that sets them apart as “trend-setters”. It is the passion of learning. This is not to be confused with having to attend courses as a prescribed requirement

set by some external agencies. Or taking up a course for the sole purpose of getting a promotion. For them and the many who are “trend-setter” teachers, their love affairs with learning are intrinsic matters of the ‘heart’. Consider too the examples of former teachers such as Mr Tan Cheng Hua, Mr Pok Vic Tor, Ms Zenda Leu, Dr Cheah Yin Mee and retired principal, Mrs Hwang-Lee See Poh. As “trend-setters”, they possess a spirit of enterprise. Mr Tan and Mr Pok have founded IT start-up companies worth millions of dollars (The Straits Times, 6 May 2002, p. H10). Ms Leu went into the publication of workbooks while Dr Cheah runs workshops for school teachers (The Straits Times, 6 May 2002, p. H11). Mrs Hwang started a learning centre for young children (The Straits Times, 6 April 2002, p. R1).

Before one concludes prematurely that “trend-setters” are only former or retired teachers and principals, stop again to consider the dictionary meaning of the word ‘enterprising’: ‘willing to try out new and unusual ways of doing or achieving something’ (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995, p. 552). It speaks of the ideas of boldness and initiative. It is my personal observation that a high percentage of our teachers have been more than adequately trained. For the rest who might feel less equipped, there are still ample opportunities for professional development. Now is the time for our teachers to leap a few steps forward. Instead of just ‘consuming’ knowledge, we must be bold enough to take the initiative to create knowledge. “We are progressing to become a knowledge-based economy and society; one where useful knowledge carries a high premium, where the application of what is known to create new, high-value knowledge will be the main generator of economic growth and social progress” (Keynote Address by the Minister for Education at the Work Plan Seminar on Education in Schools, “Towards Ability-Driven Education”, 5 September 1998, Ministry of Education, Singapore).

In the new knowledge-based economy, changes are swift and inevitable. Indeed, the attitude of ‘why fix things when they ain’t broke’ can no longer be a justification for contending with the status quo. “Trend-setter” teachers embrace change. In fact, they welcome change as they seek continuous improvement. Mr Tay Cheow Yong, a Master Teacher from the pioneer batch, agreed that “teachers have to constantly adapt to new challenges” (Contact, Issue No. 36, May 2002, p. 7). He added, “Things are always changing around us, so we as teachers should also find new ways to motivate our students” (ibid.).

There is an ugly side to this knowledge economy though. “The terrible twin of a knowledge-based economy is global competition. More than ever, only the best and fittest will survive” (The Straits Times, 9 April 2002). Hence, “trend-setter” teachers cannot afford to be parochial in their mentality. Speaking about the first-world mentality, the Minister for Education mentioned that “in a number of areas, Singapore is Number One today because others find themselves behind, not because we boldly led from the front all the way” (Keynote Address by the Minister for Education at the Work Plan Seminar on Education in Schools, “Towards Ability-Driven Education”, 5 September 1998, Ministry of Education, Singapore). Juxtapose this comment with the need for a global mindset and we can see that we still have a long way to forge ahead.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

For teachers to be able to move more towards being “trend-setters” and away from being “consumers”, I believe that the following three critical success factors need to be in place.

Firstly, teachers must perceive that moving towards the more ideal end of such a continuum of creative tension will bring about benefits to the individual, schools or the teaching profession. Secondly, they must be willing to change. Thirdly, a supportive working environment capable of nurturing the enterprising spirit in teachers would be most helpful. Such an environment would allow for experimentation and “be more tolerant of mistakes, mistakes honestly made, mistakes responsibly rectified before serious consequences, and not mistakes due to sloppy effort” (Keynote Address by the Minister for Education at the Work Plan Seminar on Education in Schools, “Towards Ability-Driven Education”, 5 September 1998, Ministry of Education, Singapore).

CONCLUSION

Although we are beginning to see more and more teachers becoming “trend-setters”, I believe that we are far from achieving the critical mass needed for a chain reaction to happen. In the words of the Minister for Education when he was commenting on efforts to see through the current initiatives in schools, he said, “We are not there yet, but we are making progress” (Ministry of Education, FY 2001 Committee of Supply Demand, 15 March 2001, Minister’s First Reply on Schools: “Making an Ability Driven Education Happen”).

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