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# **TRIAL GROUP-MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME FOR TRAINEE TEACHERS A PRELIMINARY REPORT**

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**Abstract:** The positive role that teacher-mentors play in the development of beginning teachers and trainee teachers has been presented extensively in the literature. Teacher-mentors can contribute extensively and influentially to the personal and professional growth of those they mentor. In the Singapore context, the National Institute of Education (NIE) is the sole teacher training institution. The programmes it offers are structured and provide an extensive range of direct training in all aspects of teacher education except one — the practicum and its accompanying mentorship, which are provided by the school to which a trainee teacher is attached. An important responsibility thus lies with the school to provide a practicum and mentorship that will develop the trainee teacher's potential in the best way. Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) [ACS(I)] has recently completed a trial of a systematic group-mentorship programme in which a trainee teacher was mentored by a group of more-experienced teachers in partnership with NIE. The programme in its pilot implementation has received positive feedback and is presented here as a model for future development.

## **Introduction**

Whether one considers the issue from a pragmatic, political or psychological perspective, the induction process is probably the most important aspect of teacher development. In Singapore, the responsibility of teacher training is carried out by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University. For most of its history, NIE played a dominant role in training teachers even in the practicum—although trainees were sent to schools, NIE supervisors had the final say in grading and assessing them.

This changed with the evolution of the teaching profession in Singapore, and in 1999, a new NIE-School Partnership Model was designed and implemented. At the same time, a conceptual framework for teacher development within the context of state-school-teacher interaction in Singapore was proposed (Chew & Chen, 1999a) and the factors which might enhance the effective development of new teachers in Singapore schools were elucidated (Chew & Chen, 1999b).

In this paper, an outline of these elements is provided. A group-mentorship programme designed around these elements is then described and discussed as one

way in which schools might construct a better developmental experience for trainee and beginning teachers.

### **The Improved NIE-School Partnership Model and its Objectives**

A complete account of the rationale and context for the implementation of this model is given by Wong and Goh (1999), who had major responsibility for coordinating and implementing much of it. The improved NIE-School Partnership Model was de facto implemented in 1999 to meet the needs of a changing education system in which a larger number of teachers would be deployed to school environments of increasing complexity and changeability. In this new model for practical training of trainee teachers, the role of the schools is “extended to accept a greater responsibility for teacher preparation and induction via mentoring”.

Essentially, a School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) is appointed by the school to assist the Principal in coordinating and overseeing the in-house mentorship programme, while his counterpart, the NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC) acts as a liaison and quality assurance officer. The assessment of a trainee teacher is thus mainly the responsibility of the teacher-mentor(s) or cooperating teachers appointed by the school. A good outline of the task definitions and scope involved can be found in Moo (1999). In addition, NIE supplies a list of suggested guidelines for schools (see *Appendix 1*) which acted as one of the bases for planning the ACS(I) Group-Mentorship Programme.

The objectives of the new model may be summarised as follows: 1) to better prepare the trainee teacher for the ‘real’ classroom, 2) to better balance the theoretical and practical training and knowledge base of the trainee teacher, and 3) to enable NIE to provide better training for a larger number of teachers without compromising on standards. The last objective arose directly from the projected needs of the Ministry of Education (Singapore) (MOE). The model therefore is one that is derived from collaboration between three entities—MOE representing the state, NIE as the teacher-training institute, and schools. Wong and Goh (1999) state that “this model is unique to Singapore”.

### **Conceptual Framework for Teacher Development**

Chew and Chen (1999b), in their study of conditions facilitating teacher development in some Singapore schools, found that several common factors resulted in more effective development and socialisation: “a stable moral and ethical environment; processes and personnel able to maintain and transmit the school’s culture and values; long-term goals and vision; support for teachers in the form of personal autonomy, resources and encouragement for creative expression; a wide range of developmental opportunities; and a culture which rewarded and sustained teachers who could fit in with it”. They suggested that “leaders of schools must learn to build teams of teachers who will act to develop and transmit school culture, and who will create a collegial atmosphere supportive of beginning and developing teachers”.

In particular, Chew and Chen (1999a) had studied a successful synergy between state, school and teacher in the case of the Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) [(ACS(I)]. Their conceptual framework accounted for the development of many teachers within the school who were effective in the Singapore context by attributing this to the

degree of overlap between the values held to be important by each of the three components of the synergy. They concluded that measures taken to align these values and help developing teachers find compatibility with values of school and state would enhance teacher development.

### **The Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) Trial Group-Mentorship Programme**

#### **Existing Mentorship System**

ACS(I) has always welcomed trainee teachers into its midst and has worked in partnership with NIE to provide a practicum and its accompanying mentorship which would meet NIE's needs and the needs of the profession in general. However, in the past, ACS(I) had been somewhat traditional and conservative in its mentorship of trainee teachers, compared to its development of new and developing trained teachers.

Traditionally, the Head of the department that deals with the trainee teacher's main academic discipline is tasked to arrange for the mentorship experience. The Head normally selects a single cooperating teacher (CT) from a pool of teachers who are more experienced and have personalities which would make a trainee teacher feel at ease. This mentor's task is then to prepare the trainee teacher for socialisation into the 'real world' of teaching. During the course of the practicum, the trainee teacher is assigned to teach a specific class within the classes normally assigned to the CT. The trainee may consult the CT on professional matters, and is observed and guided by the CT on occasion.

There are some serious deficiencies with this existing model. The ideal mentorship situation does not always arise in the 'real world' because of several factors: 1) the personalities of mentor and trainee may fail to mesh smoothly and there is a measure of discomfort or incompatibility between the parties; 2) the mentor may be experienced and compatible but unable to see where the trainee may be reinforced or has room for development; 3) the mentor may not have sufficient time to give the trainee as much attention as may be required. In addition, because the trainee teacher is assigned to a few classes specifically and entirely, it is difficult for the CT to maintain direct contact with the class. This results in a weakening of rapport between CT and class, and may not allow the CT to detect deficiencies in the learning process until the trainee has left. Time then has to be expended in remedial action.

#### **The Group-Mentorship Programme**

In February 2000, Chew (as Head of Science at the school) was tasked by ACS(I) to take charge of the mentorship of a trainee teacher under the new Improved NIE-School Partnership Model. In effect, he would be adopting the role of SCM in several important aspects. Analysis showed that a problem statement could be formulated as follows: to fulfil the demands of the Partnership Model, while validating the studies completed in the previous year regarding teacher development, and reducing or eliminating the deficiencies of the existing system. A proposal to develop a new form of mentorship was then designed and approved by the senior administration of the school.

Essentially, the new programme differed from the old system in five ways, the first two related mainly to team selection and the last three related more to the structuring

of the classroom experience: 1) the one-on-one mentorship was replaced by a group of six teachers with various roles; 2) the selection of the group was based on a wider range of factors; 3) the classes assigned to the trainee were selected not only from those taught by one teacher, but from all those taught by the teachers in the group; 4) each class was not fully assigned to the trainee, but continued to be taught in part by the original teacher; and 5) classes and teachers from the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) were involved.

The objectives of the new programme were those of the NIE-School Partnership Model coupled with the objective of socialising the trainee not only into a 'real' classroom but into a 'real' staff room environment with a specific culture. For this, the programme had to reflect an awareness of the factors elucidated by Chew and Chen (1999a, 1999b).

### **Team Selection in the Group-Mentoring Programme**

It was decided on consideration of the various objectives and factors that a group of teachers working as a team would serve the purposes of the mentorship better than a single teacher or isolated teachers. Using a larger team than usual would allow for more options in guidance, assessment, time management and range of experience for the trainee. The team selection took into account the trainee's personal characteristics, and the subjects she was being trained to teach. Team selection also took into account the contribution each member could make in terms of the factors found desirable in teacher development.

The final team consisted of Chew (as Head of Science and de facto SCM/facilitator for this trial), Phuan (GEP Upper Secondary Biology/Lower Secondary Science teacher), Toh (Senior Subject Teacher for Biology), Si-Hoe (Lower Secondary Science teacher) and Wong (GEP Upper Secondary Chemistry teacher). Tan (as Head, Gifted Education Programme), maintained a watching brief and handled matters concerning the GEP.

While the main mentorship roles (e.g. developmental supervision, academic and logistic support, teacher socialisation) were handled by the team as a whole, members of the team did specialise in certain specific areas. In the team, Chew worked directly with Phuan in planning a comprehensive time-table designed around the schedules of the other teachers. He also discussed the school milieu and school policies with Yeow, as well as took charge of any matters requiring authorisation at a higher level. Phuan acted as 'field coordinator' to liaise directly with Yeow on everyday matters such as location of classrooms, recommended practices, mealtimes, time management and scheduling. As the youngest female teacher in the team, Phuan would be the main contact and confidante for Yeow. Toh, with more than 30 years of experience in the school, would act as a source of school-specific professional knowledge relating to both staff and student matters. Phuan and Toh would provide guidance in the teaching of Biology (Yeow's main subject area) in both classroom and laboratory. Si-Hoe and Wong handled the subject areas which were secondary to Yeow's main subject area. As Chew and Si-Hoe were both alumni of the school, they were also able to provide psychological and cultural insights into the behaviour of students (and on occasion, the staff).

Tan's role was an unusual one. In the past, MOE's Gifted Education Branch had been wary of allowing trainee teachers to experience the Gifted Education environment. Their reason had been that it might be unfair to both the trainee as well as the students, since the education of the gifted required special training. However, as the school administration had already authorised the use of GEP teachers and classes for very good reasons, it became necessary for some form of oversight to allay the fears of the Branch.

In brief, the team consisted of teachers with administrative authority, academic experience both wide and deep, effective teaching skills, school-specific knowledge, ability to transmit school culture, and a range of personalities which were likely to be compatible.

### **Logistics and Structuring in the Group-Mentorship Programme**

Yeow's time-table was planned so that she would experience about two-thirds of the typical teacher's workload. This workload was spread out over one class from each of the teachers Phuan, Toh, Si-Hoe and Wong. In each class, Yeow would teach the majority of the periods per week, while 1-2 periods would be reserved for the teacher-mentor to keep in touch with the class and ensure that the overall curriculum was still on track. In addition, provision was made for Yeow to team-teach with her mentors, observe them teaching, and be observed teaching by them. In line with NIE policy, Yeow was limited to only observing her mentors in the first week, but played an active role thereafter.

The selection of classes was designed to give Yeow maximum exposure to as many levels, subjects and streams as possible. The four classes assigned to her therefore consisted of a Secondary One Science class, a Secondary Two GEP Science class, a Secondary Three GEP Chemistry class, and a Secondary Three Biology class. An appropriate balance between IT-based, practical and theory lessons was also provided.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Yeow's practicum was held to be a success by Lee, her NIE Supervising Coordinator (NSC). He said that, "My personal observation of (Yeow) as compared to my observations of other trainees in other schools, is that she comes forth as a more confident trainee teacher (because) of the commitment of a team of teachers helping and guiding her."

The four teacher-mentors also found that co-teaching with a trainee had given them new insights into the problems facing a new teacher. They appreciated that they had time with their students even though Yeow had taken over a large portion of their teaching duties in certain classes. They were thus able to keep track of progress made in general and with respect to specific students, as well as advise Yeow on her approach to each class and the specific students therein.

Yeow herself commented, "This practicum model gave me a chance to be familiar with the lower secondary syllabus. That helped me to be more equipped to teach the upper secondary sciences since I am more aware of science foundations my students had from their lower secondary science course. Every teacher is unique, having different strengths and weaknesses. I have benefited tremendously from each of my 4

cooperating teachers, discovering differing strengths in all. This enabled me to further develop my pedagogical tools, after learning from the various CTs... Having 4 cooperating teachers gave me a chance to know many colleagues who offered precious advice. I made friends during the process as well. Furthermore, exposure to 4 different classes allowed me to be familiar with different kinds of students and their differing syllabus.”

In general, the team agreed that the following positive outcomes had been achieved: 1) the trainee teacher had developed confidence and a realistic view of classroom as well as staff room life; 2) the trainee teacher was better-equipped in terms of practical teaching knowledge and skills; 3) standards had been maintained (demonstrated in that it was considered that Yeow would make a useful addition to the staff); 4) the trainee had been usefully exposed to a wide range of learning opportunities; 5) the trainee had developed school-specific cultural awareness. In addition, the deficiencies of the old model had been satisfactorily compensated for through the use of a team rather than mentors working singly or in isolation.

From NIE’s perspective, this practicum model also enhances the image of the teaching profession by successfully conveying to the trainee that teaching is a complex task which cannot be uniformly performed by just any teacher on any student. It reinforces the understanding of the trainee teacher that different standards of students require different approaches and encourages trainees to be more reflective in developing their own professional practices.

Although the outcomes were mostly good, a few areas of difficulty remain. Mentors and trainee alike commented that the system seemed complex at first, and that preparation was not an easy task. In addition, Yeow pointed out that since she only taught one class per subject/level, transferring what she had learnt to another class was not always possible. Time-tabling was also slightly difficult.

These areas of difficulty can perhaps be overcome by briefing teachers in greater detail and allowing for a longer period of preparation and planning before the mentorship officially begins. Although NIE provided almost four weeks between notification and mentorship, preparing teachers to work as a team may take slightly longer. One is confident that as group-mentorships become the norm, such difficulties will be eliminated.

As a learning experience for all concerned, the ACS(I) Trial Group-Mentorship Programme has been a success. It has accomplished what it set out to do and will provide a good basis for future development in the area of training future recruits to this honourable profession.

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**SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS ON PRACTICUM  
ARRANGEMENTS FOR TRAINEE TEACHERS (PGDE/SEC)**

Cooperating Schools in NIE's Practicum programme are kindly requested to assist the trainee teachers (TTs) in their professional development through the provision of guidance and practicum learning experiences. To this end, some guidelines are suggested:

- 1 Appointment of experienced members of staff as **Cooperating Teachers** to help and guide the TT in their professional development.
- 2 **Induction** of TT into the school establishment and culture by the Principal/Vice-Principal/School Coordinating Mentor.
- 3 **Introduction** of TT to the staff and students of the school, and provision of workspace in the staff room.
- 4 Arrangement of **Teaching Timetables** to provide
  - a. a total of **16-20** teaching periods **per week** (observation of lessons during first week, teaching of lessons for remaining weeks),
  - b. opportunities to teach both their CS subjects as indicated on the computer printout and
  - c. opportunities to teach only **Sec 1 – Sec 3** classes.
- 5 Arrangements for TT to **observe** how some ECAs are conducted, but **NOT** to take charge of an ECA.
- 6 The school decides which session the TT should teach in.
- 7 TTs may be asked to help relieve classes **no more than 2 periods per day**, when staff are on medical leave.
- 8 Arrangements for TT to **observe** their Cooperating Teachers and other experienced teachers teaching and managing a range of classes/levels/streams during the **first week** of the Practicum.
- 9 **Observation by Cooperating Teachers** of TTs' classroom teaching performance. Recommended number of **formal** observations: a **total of 8** for the two CS subjects altogether, spread over **9 weeks** of the Practicum period.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTNERSHIP!**