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# Building a Quality Teaching Force – the Collaborative Approach

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Boo Hong Kwen

## *Introduction*

The purpose of this article is to call for a greater collaboration amongst the tripartite partners that are involved in the training and professional development of teachers. I write from my background as one who has taught as a teacher for 6 years in the Singapore school system, as one who has served as a science specialist inspector in the Ministry of Education Headquarters (MOE HQ) for 5 years, and now as one who has served in the National Institute of Education (NIE) as a teacher educator for 10 years.

In his speech to participants at the recent MOE work plan seminar (held on 23 September 2000), Rear-Admiral (NS) Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence mentioned that the biggest challenge facing us for the next 5 to 7 years is the building of a quality teaching force for the 21st century.

Indeed this task of building a quality teaching force is a mammoth one that requires the concerted effort of all personnel involved, including MOE HQ officers, school personnel and NIE teacher educators.

Quality teachers are those imbued with the right attitudes and values for teaching (such as moral integrity, a sense for responsibility for himself, his family, his community and country, ability to role model and inculcate the desired outcomes of education in his students, including the ability to work in teams and value every contribution), equipped with the right skills (in, not only the delivery of content but also in the inculcation of the right skills and values in his students), and knowledgeable in content as well as in pedagogy.

As the principal of Cedar Girls' Secondary School reminded us in her presentation on "Integrating character education into curricular and co-curricular activities" at the work plan seminar, "It takes ten years to grow a tree, and one hundred years to 'grow'

a person" (Chinese proverb). We, the tripartite partners involved in teacher education and development, are still learning and growing ourselves and therefore, it is important that we all recognize that it is only through working together and building upon each others' strengths and contributions that we can adequately address the challenges facing us.

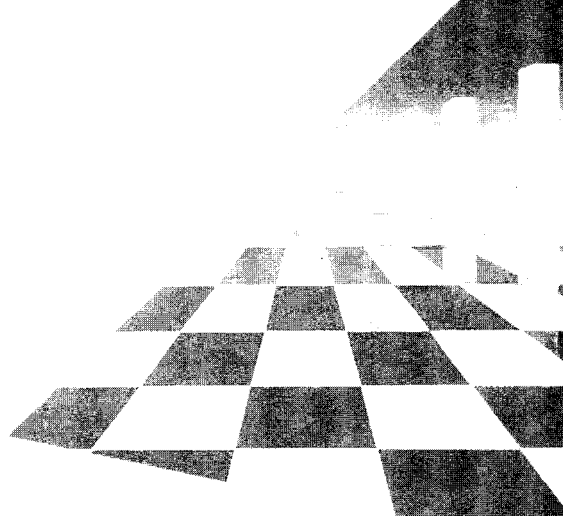
### ***The Need for Greater Collaboration among Teacher Trainers and Developers***

From the interaction within the group discussion that I was involved in, as well as from feedback from some of my NIE colleagues who took part in various other discussion groups, it was clear that we, the tripartite partners involved in the training and professional development of teachers, are still some way from the goal of being a united team. We were saddened by the fact that some of our fellow partners from the schools felt it necessary to adopt a "finger pointing" approach to addressing current concerns rather than engaging in a constructive search for practical solutions.

Of specific concern were some of the statements made in our discussions groups, the essence of which was a general view that NIE was not adequately preparing student teachers for their role in the classroom and that too much was expected of the schools. I believe that such expressions of concern indicate a lack of understanding of the particular role and necessary limitations of the courses provided by NIE.

For a typical one-year Post-Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education {PGDE(Sec)} course the contact time that a typical student has with NIE staff amounts to 338 hours (calculated by taking 26 academic units X 13 hours) in which we are required to cover concepts and principles that relate to a wide range of topics, including psychology of pupil development and the learning process, social context of teaching and learning, instructional technology, including information technology, teaching and classroom management, teaching and learning of two academic subjects.

If one compares this 338 hours with the contact time that PGDE(Sec) students have with the school personnel during their practicum of 9 weeks and their school experience period of 1-2 weeks, it can be seen that in fact NIE staff really do not have that much contact time with our trainee teachers compared with the school personnel. For a typical NIE teacher educator such as



myself, I have only 16 hours of formal contact time to prepare my PGDE (Sec) students to begin the process of learning to assess pupils' learning in chemistry.

Clearly, it is not possible for NIE to provide more than an initial foundation for educational practice upon which the teacher will build throughout his career. In practice, this is true of all education; the formal coursework cannot be expected to provide more than a base upon which the student will build further knowledge and practical experience with the help of peers, mentors, career developers and through in-service training.

A selection of the specific statements made during the group discussions at the work plan are reproduced and commented upon below.

#### **Statement 1**

*NIE staff are shifting their workload on practicum supervision to the schools”.*

The expressed theme was one of unhappiness that NIE teacher educators are shirking their responsibilities by getting school personnel to do NIE's work of supervising trainee teachers during their practicum.

#### **My comment:**

It seems that there is both miscommunication and misunderstanding about the NIE-school practicum partnership model here. Studies in teacher training have indicated that school practitioners' have a very significant contribution to the training of new teachers on many aspects, including the development of insights about instructional contexts where learning application takes place. Also, the recent large increases in the intakes of initial teacher trainees together with the shortage of manpower at the NIE have necessitated the adoption of the partnership model. In this model, the teacher practitioner or co-operating teacher, acting as mentor and guide, supports and complements the NIE's role by helping to develop the trainee teachers' attitudes, skills (including classroom management skills which is best learned at the school classroom) and content knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge.

Teacher training and professional development should be seen as a continuous, life-long process, a continuum, beginning with the initial training provided through coursework at the NIE, followed by school mentorship during the practicum, and followed subsequently

and continually by in-service training provided by a variety of teacher trainers and developers, including those from NIE, schools and MOE HQ.

### **Statement 2**

*“NIE is producing new teachers who lack classroom management skills.”*

#### **My comment:**

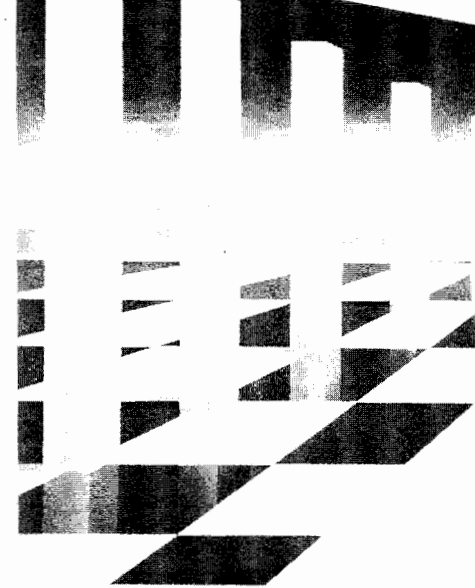
It takes time, effort and experience, i.e. a process, to produce good classroom managers. As cited by the principal of Cedar Girls' Secondary School, the education of a person, including a good classroom manager, is a long process that involves the investment of time and effort, and requires the concerted effort of all personnel involved in teacher education and professional development. Whilst in a PGDE or BSc/BA course at NIE is able to cover the relevant principles through theory and case studies, we have neither the opportunity nor the resources to provide a practical working classroom environment. This is clearly an area that needs the NIE-school partnership.

### **Statement 3**

*“NIE should teach less theory and train teachers in the practical aspects.”*

#### **My comment:**

Training teachers is not like training animals. Animals can be trained mechanically, and successfully, by the use of techniques such as the stimulus-response training regimes of behaviorists such as Skinner and Pavlov. As suggested by Gestalt psychologists such as Wertheimer, Koffka and Kohler, human learning, especially in learning to solve problems, is accomplished by insight, not by mechanical repetition. Insights need to be developed in various ways and means, including through the understanding of relevant concepts, principles and theories, and through case studies. Again, this is an area in which we need to recognize the synergistic benefits of foundational education and “on-the-job” training provided by the schools. At NIE, we aim to provide teachers with a formal theoretical foundation for good educational practice which includes the “whys” and “whats” and not merely the “hows”. Unless our teachers are equipped with a firm foundation in educational theory, how can we hope that they will be resourceful enough to adapt, refine, innovate, improve and upon existing knowledge and methods?



## **Conclusion**

The most effective way of educating and developing teachers ultimately boils down to role-modeling by the teacher educators and developers. If we, the teacher educators and developers, the tripartite partners at the schools, MOE HQ and NIE cannot collaborate and work as a team, in a concerted way, towards the professional development of teachers for whom we are jointly responsible, then ultimately we are undermining our own efforts. We can expect our trainees and mentees to be “laughing behind our backs” and pointing a finger at us if, on the one hand, we require them to work cooperatively as a team whilst, on the other hand, we cannot role-model for them collaboration or teamwork in practice. The task of moulding our teachers into a quality teaching force is tough enough, even with good teamwork and cooperation among the tripartite partners.

So let us stop undermining each other’s work. Let us not base our opinions of an entire group on individual encounters with a few isolated cases of poor examples. Let us consider the big picture; the welfare of future generations of students who are going to be impacted by their interactions with teachers for whose training and professional development we have collective responsibility. By all means, we can all use feedback from our fellow team members in order that we can contribute to improving our total collective output; but feedback needs to be constructive so as to build up rather than break down the team ethos.

Ultimately, it is not higher salaries and better promotion prospects alone that will retain teachers, especially the younger and the more idealistic ones. I believe that what puts some of these younger teachers off teaching as a career is evidence of the hypocrisy of their “seniors”: their teachers, mentors and higher-ups, that is we, the tripartite partnership of MOE HQ, school leaders and NIE lecturers. For all of us preach “teamwork and cooperation” and institutionalize these as desired outcomes for them to inculcate in their students and at the same time, by our conduct, we demonstrate that we ourselves are unable to produce good team work!

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**Dr Boo Hong Kwen** is Associate Professor attached to the Science and Technology Education Academic Group\*, National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University. E-mail: [hkboo@nie.edu.sg](mailto:hkboo@nie.edu.sg)

\*NIE is organised into 10 Academic Groups. The Science and Technology Education Academic Group (STE) is one of these groups.