

Conference Track: Teaching and Education

Title: Development of Teacher Quality: Rising above Structures, Standards and Stereotyping

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Abstract:

Quality education through quality teacher has an issue of much debate in recent years. Education researchers and policy makers have been looking at educational reforms internationally to learn from the best performing educational systems such as Finland, Korea and Singapore. How do we develop teacher quality? Is it about creating structures for entry requirements, recruitments and compensation? Is it about raising standards of accreditation and accountability? In learning from the best systems can we replicate successful types of practices and policies. This presentation provides a perspective of teacher education and development from Singapore and successful East Asian countries and argue that secrets of success in developing teacher quality goes beyond the structures, standards and stereotypes. Using case illustration the presentation focuses on the importance of teacher symbolism, teacher calling, subcultures of professional care and development as well as teacher leadership and inspiration. The paper conclude with recommendation on how balance the big picture management of policies and practices with the logos, ethos and pathos of teacher symbol.

Almost fifty years ago, Singapore was a picture of poverty, insufficient natural resources and warring ethnic populace. Today, it is one of Asia's great success stories with a leading finance industry, a global hub for trade and transportation and listed as one of the world's high performing education systems. For the past five years, Singapore has ranked among the top four countries in the world on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) science and math tests and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading test. National assessments tell a similar story. Ninety-seven percent of its students passed their sixth-grade "leaving" exam in 2011. In 2007, McKinsey & Co. released a study recognizing Singapore as one of the top performing educational systems in the world. The said report highlighted three important factors that set top 10 performing school systems apart: (1) getting the right people to become teachers; (2) developing them into effective teachers; and (3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. Its universities are at par with the world's best. According to a survey by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), both the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) have improved on their positions in a global ranking of universities in 2011. Oftentimes this city-state is frequented by educators from around the world to learn how Singapore achieved its level of performance. The answer: developing high-quality teachers.

Policymakers in Singapore have recognized early on that since it has few other resources, its viability as a country depends on its people's ability to contribute meaningfully to the world. To achieve this, a solid education is being invested to every Singaporean child. From the cornerstone of that system are effective school leaders, good teachers and wise policy choices.

Thus, Singapore has successfully developed a comprehensive approach for recruiting, training, evaluating and compensating teachers.

Teacher Symbolism and Calling

In 2009, NIE initiated a new Model of Teacher Education for 21st Century (TE²¹) in its endeavour to develop a strong teaching force for the 21st century. TE²¹ presents recommendations that are intended to enhance the key elements of teacher education, including the underlying philosophy, curriculum, desired outcomes for teachers, and academic pathways. The new V³SK model, which stands for values³ (V), skills (S), and knowledge (K), underscores the requisite knowledge and skills that teachers must possess in meeting the challenges of the 21st century classroom. First, placing the learner at the centre of the teacher's work. Second, building a strong identity as a professional. Third, service to the profession and community.

Strong academic accomplishment is a pre-requisite for entry into the Singapore teacher training programmes so it is understandable for many student teachers to be pre-occupied with learning the basic skills of teaching. While such philosophy is important, having good classroom management skills or content knowledge is not enough. Beginning teachers soon realise that they need a strong sense of inner purpose and drive for the long haul. As a result Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) have invested heavily to build up a strong sense of professionalism among teachers. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of becoming a teacher involves understanding and acting on the position of privilege and responsibility in nurturing the child. Learning to "lead, care, and inspire", as a vision for Singapore's teaching service, promotes and acknowledges that. By words and deeds, teachers touch and shape the lives of their students. Teachers inspire their students to believe in themselves and be the best they can be.

Teacher Leadership and Inspiration

Along with 188 other states, Singapore signed the Millennium Declaration on 8 September 2000, which stipulated eight goals, universal education included, to be achieved by year 2015. Government leaders and policymakers have acknowledged that for a nation to succeed members of the society must be encouraged to achieve their full educational potential to prepare them citizens for a knowledge-based dynamic technological society. Since 1950, teacher education in Singapore has been defined by its relevance, responsiveness to changing local and global educational landscapes and is committed to ensuring the highest standards of quality and excellence. Educational developments are geared towards responding to the economic and social needs of the people and have continued to keep abreast of the latest technological innovations. But beyond just the economic pursuit of developing individuals, according to NIE Director Professor Lee Sing Kong, Singapore tries to maintain an educational system that adopts a holistic approach that preserves national culture, identity, values rooted in family and community.

Teacher education in Singapore attempts to engage education with its multifaceted challenges by a matrix of connectivity and alignment allowing for a balance of autonomy and optimal monitoring and resourcing. Teacher education builds on MOE's well-grounded vision on education, which is the vision to become a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of

contributing towards Singapore's continued growth and prosperity, and capable of becoming creative thinkers, lifelong learners, and leaders of change. Having recognized that the quality of teachers determines the quality of education, a strong strategic partnership is needed between the key stakeholders - MOE, NIE, and schools - where each plays a distinct yet harmonizing role in achieving the desired outcomes of education. The collective strength of the three, forming the Enhanced Partnership Model, aims to provide the necessary collaborative framework of shared values and goals which are aligned to a unified outcome. It gives support as beginning teachers transition from campus to schools, while enhancing the continued learning and professional development pathways available to the teaching workforce. Another factor that has pushed for Singapore to excel in education is its teacher evaluation system. The Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS) measures individual competencies to assess performance outcomes to evaluate career track, promote and pay teachers. The EPMS represented an important shift from focusing teacher evaluation on observable characteristics, such as subject matter expertise, classroom management, and instructional skills, to emphasizing the underlying characteristics, or "competencies", that lead to exceptional performance. When Singapore's MOE uses the term 'competencies', it is referring specifically to the underlying traits and habits – patterns of thinking, feeling, acting or speaking – that cause a person to be successful in a specific job or role. In short, it spells out the knowledge and skills requirements as well as professional characteristics appropriate for each of the three tracks namely, the teaching track, the leadership track, and the senior specialist track.

Conclusion

The preparation of teachers in Singapore is regarded as a lifelong process. Singapore has achieved what many countries have hoped for. It was able to attract the highest calibre of young people to the teaching profession; train them at both the pre-service and in-service levels; and encourage a professional working environment that propagates community respect and service. Furthermore, the TE²¹ framework strengthens teacher education along the whole continuum from initial teacher preparation to teacher professional development. These include reinforcing the learner-centred, professional-identity, and service-orientated values that act as a scope for teachers; developing a set of initial teacher competencies that articulate and commit what NIE will deliver to the schools; creating better nexus between theory and practice, extending mentoring, and involving NIE faculty more deeply in schools; extending teachers' pedagogical repertoire to promote depth and engagement and use of new technology; and enhancing teachers knowledge of assessment so that they can use best practices in developing and evaluating both traditional and 21st century student outcomes.