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Doing Good in a Time of Testing:
Enduring Work of Public School Teachers in Singapore

Pauline Chia
Harvard Graduate School of Education
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Howard Gardner, Series Editor

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“Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them and try to follow where they lead.” - Louisa May Alcott

Abstract

As most of the research on the impact of high stakes testing focuses on the problems and dilemmas faced by teachers, teachers are often portrayed either as victims of such a system or as victimizers who shortchange students' learning. The study of teachers, particularly those in an Asian context who thrive to do good work in a system that is demanding and trying, is limited. In this paper, using survey and interview techniques, I address this shortage by focusing on well-regarded public school teachers in Singapore. I argue that teachers, who strive to do good work, have to navigate the constantly shifting demands and tension of academic achievement and holistic education in the 21st century. I conclude that conflicting demands and priorities spur teachers to struggle productively, and articulate what it means to do work that is excellent, engaging, ethical and enduring. Therefore, a change in public discourse and a focus on possibilities, instead of problems, may help teaching to become stronger and better aligned.

Introduction

As a small and young nation with limited natural resources, Singapore regards education as an investment in human resource development. Following political independence after World War Two, the main goal of education in Singapore was to equip the younger generation with the relevant knowledge and skills to meet the manpower needs of a developing industrialized economy. Singapore's colonial experience and historical factors continued to influence educational policies such as adopting a subject-based curriculum and maintaining a national examination system partly linked to an external British examinations syndicate (Ho and Gopinathan, 1999). At that time, Singapore's pragmatic approach to nation building served the people well. In the ensuing decades education has provided opportunities for children of various races and socioeconomic backgrounds to achieve on the basis of merit and effort.

As the economy improved and the society matured, Singapore reviewed its educational policies and attempted to promote excellence in schools through a largely centralized system of schooling. Although a number of new initiatives were implemented, for the teachers, the results of national examinations were the most visible measure of achievement. Furthermore, the students were streamed based on their performance at such high-stakes national examinations. Inevitably, this trend resulted in greater emphasis being placed on examinable subjects and the non-examinable subjects such as physical education and the inculcation of values took a backseat. While the efficiency-driven education produced positive outcomes, with Singapore's youth performing exceptionally well in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS 1995, 1999 and 2003) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2009), it has raised the questions of what excellence in schools mean and what the purpose of education should be.

At the turn of the century, the advent of rapid technological advances and globalization framed the transition to a knowledge-based economy. The landscape of work changed dramatically in light of the rate of knowledge transfer, demands for higher skills, and the trend towards a culturally diverse workforce (Coats, 2009). To meet the needs of the knowledge-based economy, Singapore and its education system moved away from production toward innovation and creativity. Learning from the examples of the United States and Great Britain, which produced highly creative leaders and thinkers in many fields, Singapore's leaders acknowledged the limitations of its mass-oriented and efficiency-driven education system. However, these countries also grapple with low average levels of literacy and numeracy, so Singapore seeks to keep the best of the old education system while going forward with the vision of "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" (Lee, 2008).

In this era of change, teachers face increased pressure to help their students excel academically and provide a holistic education in an already competitive system. Yet, the concept of a holistic education remains nebulous, as the Ministry of Education (Singapore) has broadly described it as "focusing on both academic and non-academic areas" (Ministry of Education website). This vague charge resulted in diverse interpretations by the various stakeholders and wide-ranging expectations of teachers' roles and responsibilities. Hence, there are more dilemmas as teachers strive to help students to acquire new knowledge and skills, along with the capacity to make wise decisions in the face of difficult times in the future. To do good work under such conflicting demands in the tightly packed curriculum, teachers need to have a clear sense of purpose and hold to the core values of their profession without being overwhelmed by the changes.

As students are the heart of education and they learn through observing how teachers behave, it is important that teachers be role models who do good work. Good work, which underpins professional work, is excellent, ethical, and engaged (Gardner, Csikzentmihalyi, and Damon, 2001). Teachers who are experts in their domain will be able to impart knowledge and guide their students to be critical thinkers in the various disciplines. Teachers with strong ethical compass will be able to cultivate ethical minds and help students to face moral dilemmas and champion socially responsible causes. Finally, teachers who are continually engaged in meaningful and purposeful work should inspire students to be intrinsically-motivated lifelong learners.

My interest lies in examining how experienced teachers strive over the years to perform good work – work that is excellent, ethical and engaging – in an education system that emphasizes academic achievement and a broadly-defined holistic education.

To frame my study, I interrogated the major research documents on the effects of high-stakes testing. The primary function of educational testing is diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of individual student’s learning; it becomes “high-stakes” when it is used to make critical educational decisions about students, educators, schools and other stakeholders (Gregory, 2003). The data derived from standardized testing also serve as one of the main tools to meet the increasing demands of accountability (Koretz, 2008).

In the existing literature, the advocates of high-stakes testing generally support the use of related data to improve student achievement and close the learning gaps. Critics, in turn, question its relation to the fundamental purposes of education. Education, when seen through the lens of standardized testing, assumes that students should absorb and master a collection of individual elements of information and then “pour out” their understanding in a decontextualized setting

(Gardner, 2006). Peters and Oliver (2009) also argue that the goals of high-stakes testing are driven by a market-based view of education that values — and perhaps over-values — competition, productivity and individual achievement.

It is not surprising that studies have provided compelling evidence to demonstrate how high-stakes tests exert a strong and negative influence on teachers' behavior and pedagogy in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The picture very often painted is a uni-dimensional view of how teachers' behaviors and practice will be changed for the worse as a result of high-stakes testing.

Firstly, due to the pressure of high-stakes tests, teachers become more control-oriented in the classroom and tend to prefer predictability in their interactions with students (Deci, 1982). Teachers adopt a more didactic pedagogical approach in the classroom, sacrifice student-centered approach of learning as it is “time consuming”, and turn into “drill sergeants” (Kohn, 2000). Teachers also limit choices and opportunities for autonomous learning (Deci, 1982). Taken to the extreme, the test essentially becomes the curriculum with an emphasis on focusing instructions on small details of the test that have very little substantive meaning: for example, format of test and techniques in answering test questions (Koretz, 2008). Consequently, this behavior has detrimental effects on the students' learning and their intrinsic motivation and self-esteem (Deci, 1982). The learning for students becomes very narrowly defined and compartmentalized as the focus is on the efficient use of time to prepare students for the tests (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Next, the existing studies show how teachers see themselves as victims of a top-down bureaucratic policy of high-stakes testing, lacking the power to manage the contradictions between their personal goals and that of the high-stakes testing system. In addition, teachers are

unable to respond to the ambivalence of what it means to be a good teacher with deliberation and purposefulness (Rex, 2004). The teachers' dilemma may manifest itself in the form of guilt as they feel that they are unable to effectively serve two "masters" – their educational goals with those of their schools or districts (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In a critique of education reform in Singapore, Ng (2008) describes teachers as products of a past era who have been trained through a system with beliefs markedly different from those now espoused. Hence, teachers struggle to change their practices in the daily work routines.

In contrast to these earlier findings, the study by Fischman, DiBara and Gardner (2006) of four admired public schools, describes teachers' negotiation with the "misalignment" with a greater sense of purposefulness. Teachers in the study play an active role in responding to the conflicting demands through creative practices. They acknowledge the tensions but do not allow the obstacles to impede their work. Teachers constantly struggle with how to navigate their own understanding of what it takes to be a good teacher with expectations from the larger field (Fischman et al., 2006).

What seems to be missing are studies in an Asian context that look closely at the work of good teachers, in systems that feature a national curriculum and high-stakes testing. Through this study, I seek insights about how teachers in Singapore navigate the constantly shifting demands and tension of academic achievement and holistic education in the 21st century.

Research Methods

To answer my research question, I carried out an empirical study through an online survey with 20 Singaporean teachers and interviews with 10 teachers who were surveyed. The survey was designed to find out about teachers' perceptions of work and their values, while the

teacher interviews explored the following core issues: purposes, values, pressures in the area of work and ethical standards.

Survey

The online survey consisted of 20 well-regarded and high-achieving teachers who have taught for at least 5 years. The subjects were nominated by various school leaders based on their professional work.

An effort was made to develop a diverse sample of teachers in terms of gender, range of public schools and disciplines. Toward this end, 11 of the respondents were male and 9 were female. The respondents taught in various public schools such as primary schools, secondary schools and junior colleges and were experts in various disciplines such as languages, sciences, mathematics and humanities. Since the participants were not sought randomly but on the basis of their expertise, they may well not represent Singaporean educators in general. Rather, they represent high-achieving educators and can be presumed to generalize to a similar group of individuals.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of demographic questions, and five questions related to the respondents' opinions about various aspects of work. The questions involved judging statements on a scale of 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Respondents also rated 15 values held by them on a scale of 'very important', 'important', 'somewhat important' and 'not important', before ranking the top three values that were judged as 'very important'.

Finally, the respondents rated 7 incidents at work on a 9-point scale, ranging from 'not very serious' (1) to 'very serious' (9), based on how serious the described situations are for the

welfare of the student(s). The respondents also described an obstacle or dilemma that they faced in their work and the strategies taken to overcome them, in response to an open-ended question.

Interviews

To inquire more deeply into the values and ethical dilemmas faced by the respondents, interviews were carried out a week after the survey was administered. Some of the interview questions are similar to the questions asked in the online survey as I wanted to compare and verify the responses of the teachers.

Interviewees were chosen from the pool of 20 respondents surveyed. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 5 male and 5 female respondents. Six of the interviewees are well-regarded teachers who received post-graduate overseas scholarships based on their professional work and nomination by experts in the domain. They are currently students at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Lynch School of Education, Boston College. The other respondents are long-term teachers who have been appointed as senior teachers and school leaders, and they are in Massachusetts and New York for various professional development courses.

I recruited interview subjects through administrative and personal contacts, and I made brief introductions of the project personally or through email. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and all were tape-recorded. The majority of the interviews lasted between seventy to ninety minutes; they covered a wide range of themes, from the backgrounds of the practitioners to their current aspirations and concerns, to their perceptions about the field (Appendix B).

The semi-structured interview approach was used because it allowed new questions to be brought up in response to what the interviewees said. This flexibility enabled the questions to be

customized to the interview context and the interviewees. This semi-structured approach permitted the researcher to probe deeper into the responses of the subjects in order to obtain richer data.

Data analyses

In analyzing the data, I tabulated the information from the online survey (Appendix C) and listened attentively to the replay of the audio records for statements that highlighted the tensions that the subjects felt they faced in their work as well as their strategies for resolving them. The data collected were selectively transcribed to elaborate salient points to each question.

The interviews that I conducted with the teachers supported the findings from the online survey, and pointed to several factors that contributed to the teachers' disposition towards education. These factors included their values and ethical standards. While their comments cannot be generalized to the other teachers, they provide an interesting, albeit small, window into how some Singaporean teachers identified their concerns with education.

The responses of the interviewees were used to develop basic categories of analyses and to reduce the data into manageable divisions. I sorted and rearranged the data before comparing the data in search of themes. As the themes surfaced through the reading of the transcripts, they guided further analyses of the data.

Findings

I demonstrate here that the effects and the implications of testing on teachers' beliefs and behavior described in the existing scholarship does not fully depict how teachers respond to high-stakes tests. My results do, however, reveal common experiences shared by the subjects in this sample that are crucial to understanding these and other teachers' dilemmas and sense of responsibility.

Initially, I adopted an *emic* perspective, that allowed expression of the voices of leading individual practitioners, The teachers described their educational goals and values, the obstacles they encountered in Singapore's efficiency-driven education system, the ethical dilemmas that arise with high-stakes testing, and the approaches and strategies they adopted to negotiate conflicting demands. Next, I adopted a contrasting *etic* view to identify the themes and make sense of the current situation in the Singapore public school system. The following themes that were related to the subjects' perceptions of education emerged from the analyses of the data:

- a) Looking within: Values and purposes of work (Excellence and Engagement)
- b) Looking beyond: Responsibility to students and society (Ethics)
- c) Looking ahead: Pressing on in the face of challenges and conflicts (Endurance)

As findings are described in more detail, sample statements from interviews (*emic* perspectives) provide support for the emerging generalizations.

Several comments and reactions to the interviews indicated that the participants viewed the testing issue as controversial. As the interview progressed, participants were more willing to reveal their personal concerns about testing and how it affected them.

Looking within: Values and purposes of work

Based on the online survey, the top two work values that were ranked as 'Very Important' and 'Important' are 'Quality of Work' and 'Chance to make a contribution to others and society'. This finding is also consistent with the interviewees' comments. All the teachers interviewed found 'flow' in delivering work of high quality and in being able to contribute meaningfully to others and society. For example, Mei explained the following:

I take pride in my work and give my best because my work affects my students and my colleagues. I am here for a purpose. I enjoy my work when my students learn, when my colleagues can see that I done my best.

In these words, one can see how Mei felt strongly about producing professional work of high quality. This sentiment was echoed when the teachers were asked what they liked about their work. All the teachers cited their interaction with students and more than half talked about the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the work that excites and engages them. Teachers also felt that their work became meaningful when they were able to influence their students and meet their needs. For example, Ling explained the following:

I like working with students and responding to different situations... Playing an active role in helping them see more possibilities and see the world is important to me. If my students realize their potential, they can do so many things and give back to society too. That way, I am also giving back to society.

Another teacher, Jaswant, explained the following:

At the end of the day, knowing that I have made an impact makes the work most worthwhile. It doesn't matter if others recognize it. I believe in myself, and that influenced me. I believe in my students. They need people to believe in them and support them... What I say and teach is the same. I am not different as a person and as a teacher.

In addition, teachers regarded their work as a “calling” although none of them used the exact word. They viewed their personal goal and work as inseparable and spoke clearly of serving others. The teachers used phrases like “being there for a purpose”, “for such a time as this”, and “being there for my students at a critical time of their lives”. Commenting on their personal values and the values that were most important to their work, the teachers talked about respect for self and for their students, a commitment to life-long learning so that they could keep improving their teaching and be good role models for their students. Additionally, they felt that their personal and work values were the same and this assertion was often revisited as they discussed their ethical responsibility as teachers.

Looking beyond the grades: Responsibility to students and society

In my interview, I asked the subjects what they felt most responsible for. Interestingly, like the teachers from the four admired high schools studied by the GoodWork Project, all the teachers interpreted the question as who they felt most responsible to. I assumed that at least one or two might talk about how they were responsible for results and test scores since teachers in Singapore tend to be evaluated and rewarded based on their ability to produce academic results.

Yet all the interviewees said that they felt most responsible to their students' growth, whether they have grown since they first stepped into school and how they turned out when they graduate. One of the teachers, Lee, explained, "I feel responsible for them. I will have failed if they turn out worse."

Furthermore, many teachers also mentioned a responsibility to students' parents, and larger community. I suggest that this may be due to the collectivist culture in Singapore, and as such the views are oriented towards interdependence and social harmony. According to Rosemont (2004), who compares individual rights and autonomy in Western morality with Confucian ethics, the Confucian thought holds a conception of rights that is grounded in a view of the self as relational rather than autonomous, a view that emphasizes social interactions and regards human excellence as something realized in such interactions. In the same vein, many respondents emphasized family-school relationships and regarded schools and families as building blocks of society. They considered their students' learning in school as something that continues beyond the walls of school and felt that it was important to forge partnerships that would allow students to apply their learning in a broader context. As such, the teachers' reasoning and decision-making seemed to stem from "neighborly morality" (H. Gardner, lecture, 9/20/2010), borne out of understandings and relations that govern a person's connections to those

whom he meets and with whom he has a reciprocal relationship. For example, Beng described his position:

I am also responsible to the parents and my students' families. I want my students to be able to relate well to people, to have meaningful relationships. They trust me with their children. I want my students to be happy and excited to go home and tell their parents what they learned.

On the other hand, most respondents also looked beyond reciprocal relationships and spoke of their ethical responsibilities as teachers. Returning unconsciously to their work and personal values, the teachers' comments also exemplified the "ethics of roles" (H. Gardner, lecture, 9/20/2010). For instance, Tay, who teaches in a high school, connected his role as a teacher to the value of making a contribution to society:

Teaching the 13 to 18 years old is very important. It's a developmental phase, for whom our actions will make a difference. I play a part in helping them to make right choices. It's not just about educating people just to develop them to their best, but also to contribute to the community and society. We need people with the heart. In that window of opportunity with our students, what are we doing to prepare our students for life?

This testimony supports the findings of earlier researchers that teachers feel most responsible to their students. At the same time, however, the responses of the teachers in this sample suggest that they are also mindful of the other stakeholders in education and their ethical responsibilities. It seems possible that this finding has been overlooked in previous studies by virtue of focusing on the isolation of teachers in their individual classrooms. What one can see in the responses of these teachers, however, is that most of the teachers in this sample look beyond their classrooms and see their students and themselves as members of a larger community.

It is interesting to note that because of the teachers' strong sense of responsibility to both the students and society, the dilemmas and tensions faced by teachers are intensified. Results of the online survey and interview reveal two dilemmas that most teachers grapple with. First, teachers struggle with meeting the students' diverse needs and meeting the demands of national

examinations at the same time. Next, they feel ambivalent toward measuring students' learning and the impact of their own work.

Meeting the students' diverse needs and the demands of national examinations.

Based on the literature review, I presented common classroom scenarios, in the online survey, that may result from an emphasis on high-stake testing. Two situations that teachers rated as most detrimental to the welfare of their students are:

- a) The teacher spent more time getting to know the students and as a result, often did not return the students' assignments on time. The students enjoyed their rapport with the teacher but did not receive timely feedback and performed poorly in exams.
- b) The teacher frequently uses the time for character/civic education to cover the examination syllabus. The students think that being well-prepared for the examination is more important.

These two situations revealed the teachers' dual accountability and in the interviews, teachers acknowledged that they had to make numerous hard decisions when they had to prepare students for national examinations within a tight time frame. The teachers' facial expressions as they described their internal conflicts were revealing. Some of them frowned while others gestured and spoke with agitation as they described their dilemma with high-stakes testing. It was apparent that the teachers struggled to meet their dual accountability when they attempted to come to terms with inner conflicts. Compared to the other questions, interviewees spent more time explaining their stance.

It is interesting to note that initially most teachers conceded that national examinations were necessary. Then, as they continued talking, all of them advocated for either reduced emphasis on testing or alternative modes of assessment. While the teachers felt that it was their responsibility to teach the students well so that they would be able to demonstrate their understanding in tests, they also felt that the social, developmental and emotional needs of the

students should be met too. Six teachers expressed their desire to help students excel in national examinations so that they would have more choices in life. Eight teachers talked about the purpose of education and schooling and how they focused on infusing values and good habits in their lessons and helping students see the relevance of what they are learning. One of the teachers, Jaswant, detailed:

I don't like how the tests are so important, my students need more time. I feel pressured when time is limited. But since I cannot change the exams, I change my approach. I don't take short cuts and just drill them, I prioritize and focus on how to be a better teacher so I can prepare them well for exams and have time to meet their needs too.

Another teacher, Kay, explained:

It is easy to just drill and practice, or spoon-feed them. But that's wrong. Teachers who do that are not helping their student. We must have integrity... I make use of the tests to ensure academic rigor and focus on critical thinking and deep understanding. You also can't separate academics and character development. I do both and students need both to succeed in the future.

Although they acknowledged the limitations of standardized testing, these teachers did not let obstacles impede their work. They did not see themselves as helpless or as trapped by such a system. Instead, they spoke with conviction about their beliefs and talked about strategies they have employed, reflecting teacher autonomy and agency. Evidently, the teachers were driven by their responsibility to their students.

Ambivalence toward measuring students' learning and the impact of their work.

Consequently, teachers expressed mixed feelings about how to measure students' learning and the impact of their work. While they acknowledged that it was important to know if the students have mastered concepts and learned well, they felt that test scores fall short. Some teachers admitted that they were encouraged when external measures such as improved attendance and test scores, indicated their students have shown greater interest or mastered key

concepts. However, all the teachers felt that students' learning and growth cannot be neatly quantified. For example, Lim explained:

It's a people business and it's hard to measure the intangibles such as relationships, happiness and character of students. I am happy when they do well but there are also other important aspects of their growth that cannot be measured by Key Performance Indicators.

Because the teachers rejected test scores as the sole measurement of students' learning, teachers admitted that they were also uncertain about how the impact of their work might be accurately measured. However, they frequently referred to their students and one of them explained, "I don't just teach them facts and skills in class, I also spend time with them in co-curricular activities, I visit their homes and call them. It's hard to measure such things." Another interviewee detailed:

Sometimes they write to tell me how they are doing, that makes me glad. After many years, when my students come back and tell me how well they are doing, I know I have made a difference. That's something that others do not see. But it doesn't matter. We're not in teaching for the rewards.

Differences in the teachers' views about whether others evaluate their work in the same way arose from their personal experiences. Four teachers felt that others did not evaluate their work in the same way, so they negotiated the ambivalence by not looking at external rewards but holding to their own convictions and values. Three of them talked about how they sought support from colleagues. Six teachers spoke of school leaders who acknowledged the time and effort they put in inside and outside of the classroom. Even with these disagreements, teachers in this study pointed to the importance of standing by ethical standards and principles, of acting consistently, even when no one was watching.

This study confirmed the findings of previous scholars: Though most teachers find it difficult to carry out good work in a profession with conflicting demands, they persevere through

this difficulty because of their deep responsibility to students and desire to have a positive impact on the students' lives.

Looking ahead: Pressing on in the face of challenges and conflicts

Perhaps related to – but, I argue, distinct from – the dimension of ethics and engagement is an unexpected commonality that the teachers in this sample shared: namely, their stance that good work in education should be enduring. There are two aspects of ‘enduring work’ that emerged in the interviews:

- a) Going through numerous hardships without giving up and
- b) Good work that is lasting and ongoing, over a period of time.

Going through numerous hardships without giving up.

In both the survey and interview, the teachers delineated their struggles to create work-life balance. The teachers acknowledged that it was hard to maintain high standards and they also talked candidly of the numerous sacrifices that had to be made, such as time for themselves and their personal commitments. When the teachers talked about “not giving up”, many teachers explained that it was important to guard against burn-out and discouragement, and support one another. Seven teachers shared their experiences with colleagues who struggled with stress and work pressures and chose to resign. When prompted, Chin provided more details:

Some young teachers try hard in the first few years but they don't sustain it. After some time, they leave to do different things, especially when the economy picks up. It's not good enough to just come in and do wonderful things for a year or two and then fizzle out. The real test is when you keep at it even when it gets rough. When teachers come and go, it's not good for their students and it's not good for staff morale too.

Many teachers expressed their doubts about “heroic teachers” who demonstrate impressive dedication initially but “fade-out”. Metaphors helped them to illustrate the dissonance

in concrete terms. For instance, comparing teaching to a marathon that requires resilience and endurance, one of teachers added that “it’s not a sprint where you effortlessly leap across hurdles”. Therefore, I argue that an essential trait of good workers is endurance. Enduring good work in education means that teachers remain steadfast even through rising expectations, dissonance between values and priorities of the institution, and uncomfortable education reforms. As education reforms and the establishment of signature pedagogies and a professional community take time, good teachers distinguish themselves by their ability to sustain work of high quality and their unwavering commitment and efforts when confronted with challenges. Endurance empowers teachers to keep obstacles and defeat from becoming permanent and keep centered on their purpose and values.

Good work that is lasting and ongoing, over a period of time.

In the interviews, teachers often talked about how the impact of their teaching can be seen not so much in the immediate results but in the future, often after the students graduate. Here, the teachers seem to echo the voices of other stakeholders such as parents and the community who often allude to the influence of education beyond the years of schooling. Five teachers talked about how it was not enough for the students to just do well when they were in school; students must be able to do well after they have graduated and go on to serve the larger community. Additionally, teachers tend to evaluate whether they have done good work based on whether their students continue to do learn and grow. One of the teachers explained:

Every year, I get a hundred new students. It motivates me to start afresh and I think about how I want to teach and inspire them. It may seem routine but it’s not. In fact, it’s hard work. Very hard... But I press on. Years down the road, the boys and girls will appreciate and I will be happy if they turn out to be good people, responsible parents and all that.

Compared to some professions where success may be visible or certain within a few weeks or months, like completing a successful surgery or sealing a lucrative deal, good work in education needs to be enduring as the rewards are often intangible. All respondents regarded test scores and international benchmarks as a mere snapshot of students' growth and learning; they felt that there was limited information and data collection on students' well-being and development in non-academic realms. Hence, good teachers often set their sights beyond the students' test scores, and beyond their graduation. Endurance means continuing to do good work even when it takes a long time to reach a goal and knowing that results may not be guaranteed or attributed to their effort.

Finally, many respondents felt that they know they have done good work when “the effects last after the students graduate”, citing intangibles such as “the spirit of curiosity”, “the quest for the common human good” and “strong relationships”. Beng, a high school teacher explained:

It's often not the exact mathematical formula or equations but something deeper, something that resembles the essence of the subject matter, looking at the world through the lens of the different disciplines... No matter which era we live in, it is this curiosity and passion to want to learn more, and make connections between ideas and coming up with better ideas to drive the human society forward. And there is this thing about the special teacher-student relationship. It's about helping students to see the value in each person, the good in everyone and to learn how best to live and love everyone.

In summary, beyond the immediate impact of their current situations, most of the subjects were concerned with how their actions influence the field of teaching and learning and with making decisions that they can live with in the long run. Although the teachers readily pointed to constraints in the education system, their resilience enabled them to stay focused on the purpose and their values, endure and overcome challenges, without succumbing to compromised work.

Discussion

In this paper I have developed a preliminary model that represents how teachers in Singapore perceive good work in public schools. I do not mean to suggest that this model describes the dimensions which all teachers or schools consider to be essential. However, I do suggest that the model offers a crucial opportunity for teachers to start discussing in what it means to do good work in schools. The model below summarizes my findings (Fig. 1).

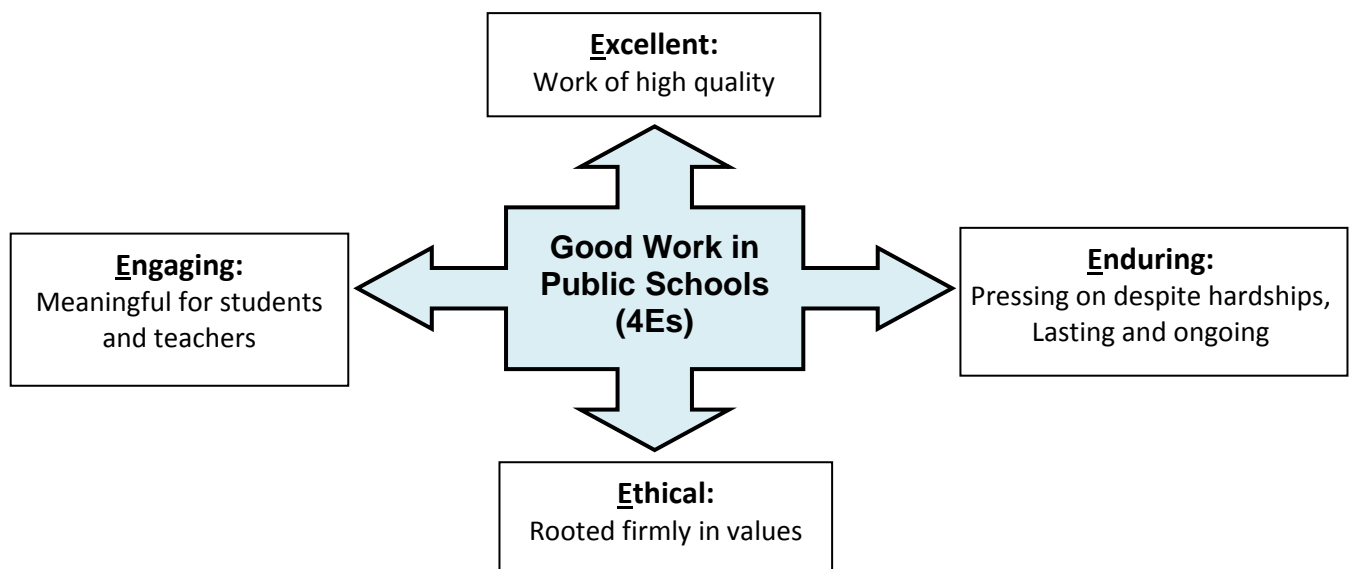


Figure 1: Teachers' perception of good work in public schools

Most striking in the study were the frank assessments by teachers of the challenges and the high standards they hold. On the basis of this finding, I argue that when teachers are able to honestly and critically address dissonance between values and priorities of the school or the education system, they consciously take a personal stand. This stance places them in a better position to negotiate conflicting demands and work towards improving the domain.

In *Good Work*, the authors find that blatant misalignment may mobilize people to struggle productively, to confirm the essence of their calling, embrace high standards, and

reaffirm their personal identities. Hence, instead of hiding under ‘superficial alignment’ I suggest that teachers openly discuss their dilemmas and struggles to seek new ways of doing things and improving schools. For instance, a meaningful conversation about what it means to do work that is excellent, engaging, ethical and enduring, under different scenarios may constitute the first step to challenging teachers’ assumptions and changing their approach in the classrooms. By changing the public discourse and focusing on possibilities instead of problems, teaching in such an education system may well become stronger and better aligned with the other operating factors.

To achieve the bold vision of “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, the Ministry of Education (Singapore) and society have important roles to play as well. The Ministry has to explore alternative ways of engaging teachers inasmuch as top-down initiatives and accountability schemes cannot create the beliefs, values and behaviors necessary for building “Thinking Schools”. Just as society expects teachers and schools to be responsive to the needs of the community, society has to understand the multi-faceted work of teachers and the mounting pressures they face. When the Ministry and society work in close partnership with teachers and schools, respectful relationships will be built and educational change will be more meaningful and enduring. For instance, when the various stakeholders are actively engaged in the public discourse of what defines good teaching and deep learning, they may look beyond “quick-fixes”, short-term results and superficial changes, and come instead to a shared understanding of what holistic development means. As their definitions of schooling and education broaden, the values of the teaching profession and society will become more in sync, and society will eventually grow into her role as a “Learning Nation”.

Limitations

The primary limitation in the survey lies in the small and specific subset of individuals – 20 well-regarded Singaporean teachers with at least five years of teaching experience. The sample size is inadequate as there are 30,698 teachers in Singapore and 20,009 have been in the education service for at least five years (Education Statistics Digest 2010). Furthermore, 6 of the teachers interviewed were pursuing their post-graduate studies in America when the study was carried out. Their responses may have been influenced by the ideas to which they have been exposed in their studies. Hence, the generalizability of the findings is limited, and useful extrapolation would require a larger sample of teachers.

An additional limitation of this study derives from its focus on high-achieving teachers who are nominated by school leaders and colleagues for the quality of their professional work and rapport with students. While it is worthwhile to understand how these teachers grapple with challenges, the sample is not random. Without another group as a comparison, the study cannot delineate which of the findings can be attributed to the teachers' years of experience or ethical standards. For example, the study cannot answer whether the teachers' ability to meet conflicting demands of the education system is due to their strong moral compass and/or borne out of their personal experiences.

Future research

Future research on this subject might draw from a greater number of teacher interviews. A study of teachers with less experience will shed additional light on how a significant group of beginning teachers (35%) grapple with the pressures of high-stakes testing and the needs of the students. Furthermore, most of the interviewees commented that beginning teachers were more

susceptible to compromised work and burn-out and they expressed concern over the higher rate of resignation among beginning teachers.

The implications of this research are considerable, insofar as senior teachers are often held up as “mentors” or role models. Researchers must continue to disentangle the stereotypes and seek to fully understand the dilemmas of teachers. Comparative ethnographic investigations as well as quantitative research are necessary to explore other factors that may be more relevant for one group than for another.

Conclusion

Much of the research on education systems that feature high-stakes testing tends to focus on problems, without capturing the *emic* perspectives of engaged professionals. Through the surveys and interviews, the story told here is one of complexity and variability on many levels. Thus this study provides another way to understand the work of teachers in Singapore and how they manage to do good work in the face of mounting demands.

As more countries thrive on knowledge-based economies and become increasingly driven by the economy, pressure mounts on emerging professions like pre-college teaching. Many countries also look to international benchmarks like the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, and market pressures to drive up the quality of education and raise student achievement; this state of affairs has invariably translated to political timelines and targets, performance standards, and increased competition. Moreover, schools are also becoming more globalised, making it difficult to assume that members of the institution hold the same work ethics and moral conscience. By explicitly looking at goodness in teachers and in the complex ways they keep on doing good work and are resilient, we may find hopeful signs.

Teachers who choose to teach in an imperfect public education system that serves a greater number and a wider range of students know that they often have to deal with conflicting responsibilities and demands. As expectations of the field increase and targets keep shifting, other stakeholders like the Ministry of Education and community groups need to work collaboratively with the teachers so that their good work may be sustainable and enduring. Therefore, it is important to articulate what is good, uncompromised work, even as we work through the problems and dilemmas. As we pay more attention to these voices working through the dissonance and toward resolution, the approaches that we take toward improving education should be more relevant and more judicious.

Those who are serious about doing good work should never just settle for an expedient choice, or a morally neutral choice, but rather pursue choices that serve the broader society and embody one's own most cherished values. In those circumstances, educational change will not be sporadic or superficial – rather, it will be purposeful and enduring.

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Title of study: Exploring Teachers’ Perception of Work

Education is of increasing importance in the knowledge-based economy and teachers play a crucial role. What is the relationship between teachers’ perception and their work? You are invited to participate in a research study that explores teachers’ perception of work. This study involves surveying participants to find out what they feel and think of their work.

Section A: Background - Please indicate the appropriate response.

1. Gender: Male / Female
2. Years of Teaching Experience: 1-4 years / 5-10 years / 11-15 years / 16 and above
3. Core subject area: Language, Mathematics, Science, Humanities, Others: _____
4. I teach in a:
 - o Elementary or Primary School
 - o Secondary School
 - o Junior College / Polytechnic
 - o University
5. Which of the following best describes the teacher preparation program you completed?
 - o Undergraduate major in education
 - o Postgraduate diploma in education
 - o Master’s program in teaching or education
 - o No formal teacher preparation
 - o Others: _____

Section B: Work values. Please indicate how important each work value is to you.

	Very important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. Opportunities to be totally engaged				
2. Professional accomplishment				
3. Recognition as an expert in my field				
4. Independence				
5. Opportunities to reach my full potential				
6. Opportunities to feel good about myself				
7. Opportunities to be creative				
8. Quality (of work)				
9. Chance to make a contribution to others and society				
10. Job security and reasonable compensation				
11. Opportunities for advancement				
12. Ability to influence the attitudes and opinions of others				
13. Chance for developing friendships				
14. Searching for knowledge				
15. Creating balance in one’s life				

Look back over your rankings. Choose THREE of the work values that you ranked as ‘Very Important’. Write the top three work values in rank order, with (1) representing the value of GREATEST importance.

1. _____ (GREATEST importance).
2. _____
3. _____

Section C: Perception of Work

This section consists of a number of statements concerning attitudes and opinions about various aspects of work. How much do you agree or disagree with each statement?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree or disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree

1. A good teacher prepares his/her students well for tests and exams.
2. A good teacher is one who knows his/her students well and has a rapport with the students.
3. A good teacher is one who enables his/her students to produce good academic results.
4. Every student is reachable; it is a teacher’s obligation to see to it that every student makes academic progress.
5. A good teacher provides a variety of learning experiences to accommodate the needs of the students.

Section D: Incidents in school

Please read each of the incidents listed below and indicate how serious you think the described situation is for the welfare of the student(s). Rate the incident on a 9-point scale, ranging from ‘Not very serious’ (1) to ‘Very Serious’ (9). Circle the number which you choose. Assume that the student is taking his/her national examination (e.g. PSLE or GCE N/O/A Level Examination) at the end of the year.

1. The teacher constantly compares the student with other students, sometimes implying that the student is not diligent or responsible. The student continually competes with the other students.
2. The teacher made the student stay back for remedial lessons because he did not do well in his tests. The student was tired and did not want to stay back.
3. The teacher narrowed the curriculum to focus on the requirements of the national examination. The students learned only what is in the examination syllabus.
4. The teacher spent more time getting to know the students and as a result, often did not return the students’ assignments on time. The students enjoyed their rapport with the teacher but did not receive timely feedback and performed poorly in examinations.
5. The teacher incorporated innovative teaching strategies and did not focus on test-taking strategies. The students learned concepts and skills but did not excel in examinations.
6. The teacher ranked and presented the student’s performance for tests and exams in class and at the parent-teacher conference. The student was discouraged by his poor class ranking and anxious about his parents’ response.
7. The teacher frequently uses the time for character/civic education to cover the examination syllabus. The students think that being well-prepared for the examination is more important.

Describe an obstacle or dilemma that you faced in your work and the strategies that you used to overcome them.

Thank you for your time and effort in filling this questionnaire.

Title of study: Exploring Teachers' Perception of Work

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research study that explores teachers' perception of work. This study involves interviewing teachers to find out what they feel and think of their work. I would like to begin by asking you about your teaching experience. This information will help me to better understand your work. After that, we will then proceed with the main part of the interview.

Section A: Background

1. Gender: Male / Female (not asked)
2. Years of Teaching Experience: 1-4 years / 5-10 years / 11-15 years / 16 and above
3. Core subject area: Language, Mathematics, Science, Humanities, Others: _____
4. I teach in a:
 - o Elementary or Primary School
 - o Secondary School
 - o Junior College / Polytechnic
 - o University
5. Which of the following best describes the teacher preparation program you completed?
 - o Undergraduate major in education
 - o Postgraduate diploma in education
 - o Master's program in teaching or education
 - o No formal teacher preparation
 - o Others: _____

Section B: Work Environment (Engagement)

1. What do you like about your work? What do you dislike?
2. What kinds of things are you trying to accomplish in your teaching now?
3. What gives meaning to what you do? What makes your work worthwhile? Can you think of an example from your work?
4. Do you consider yourself a professional? Do you feel like you are part of a professional community?
5. What kind of values do you impart to your students?

Follow-up questions:

6. How does the level of stress compare from when you first joined teaching?
If stress is negatively affecting your work, how can you change the circumstances or deal with feelings of stress? Can you think of something you did to deal with stress?
7. If you were to choose again, will you choose to be a teacher?

Section C: Beliefs, Values and Purposes (Excellence)

1. In your work as a teacher, what do you feel most responsible or loyal to? Why?
2. What are the personal beliefs or values that guide your work as a teacher?
3. What are the values that are most important to your work? Are these different from the values that are most important to you personally?
4. How do you measure the impact of your teaching?
5. Do others evaluate your work the same way? (If not, does it create tension?)

Follow-up questions:

1. What qualities make a good teacher?
2. What of your work are you most proud of?
3. Are there specific qualities that have contributed to your achievements as a teacher?

Section D: Challenges at work (Ethics)

1. Have your workload today changed from the time when you started teaching? In what ways?
2. Have you taught graduating classes? Or prepared students for national examinations?
3. What effects did the high stakes examination have on the way you teach? On your interaction with students?
4. Discrepancies in time allocation. Do you think that sufficient time is devoted to holistic development of students? (e.g. character education vs. preparation for examinations)
5. Do you feel your personal beliefs ever conflict with the dominant values in your work? What conflicts or discrepancies do you see between your values and your work?
6. If you were in a higher position of authority, how would you do things differently?

Follow-up questions:

- a) Describe some pressures in your area of work or constraints that you face as a teacher
 - How do you go about dealing with these pressures and difficulties?
 - How would you like to change this situation?
- b) Describe an incident in your work where you weren't sure about the right course of action.
 - How did it become clear to you what to do?
 - How did you deal with beliefs/practices you disagree with?
 - Has it become harder to do work you consider ethical?

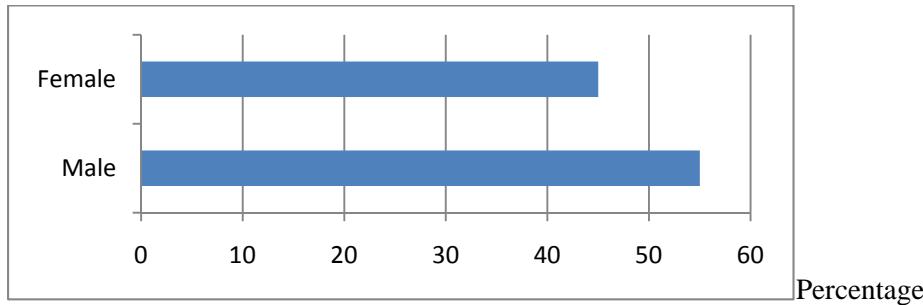
Closing:

We are coming to the end of the interview. Is there anything you would like to add?

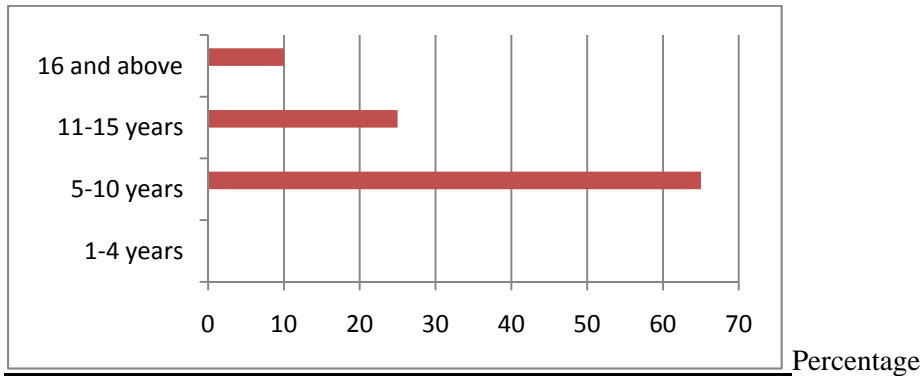
Thank you for your time.

Section A: Background of Respondents

1. 11 male (55%) and 9 female (45%) teachers responded.

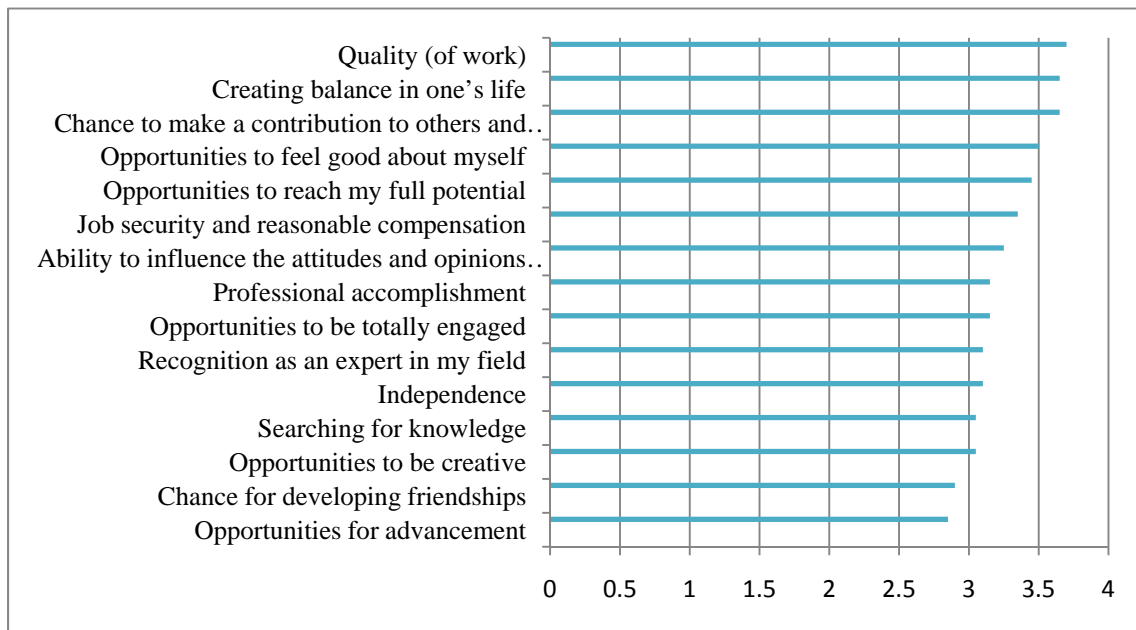


2. Years of Teaching Experience: 1-4 years / 5-10 years / 11-15 years / 16 and above



Section B: Work Values

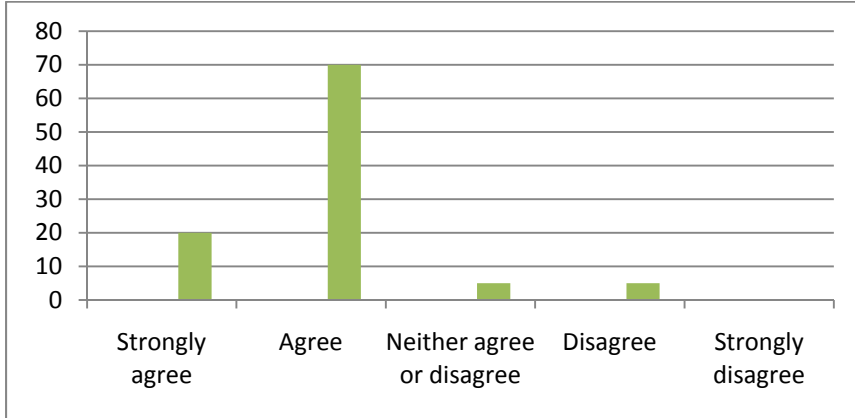
Comparison of work values rated by the teachers, n=20



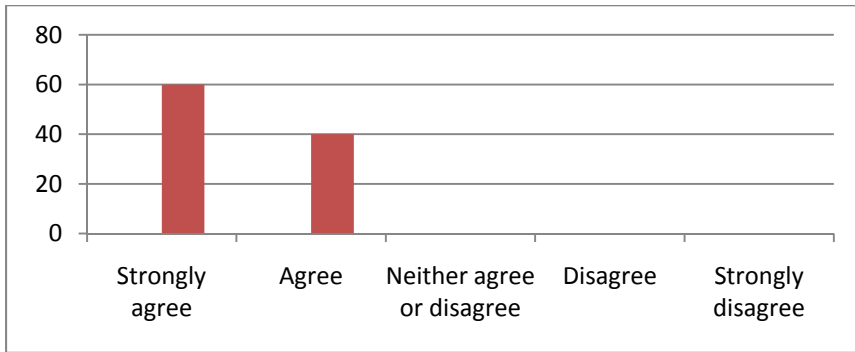
Section C: Perception of Work

Reactions to the statements:

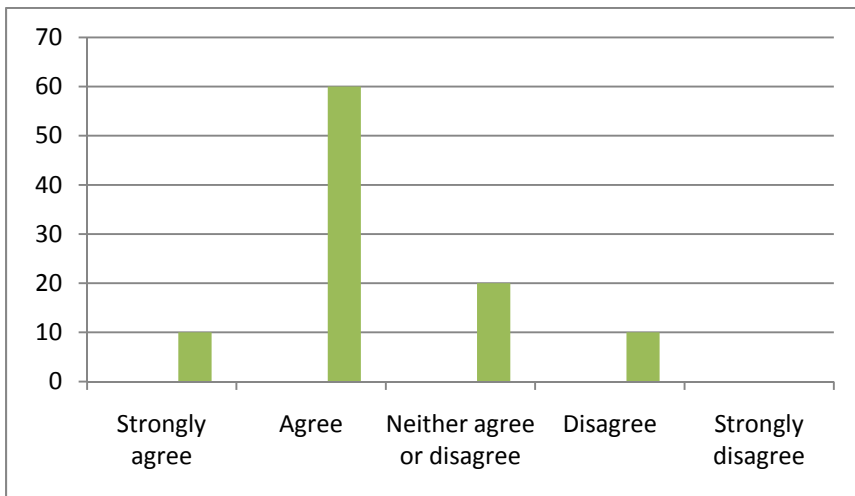
1. A good teacher prepares his/her students well for tests and exams.



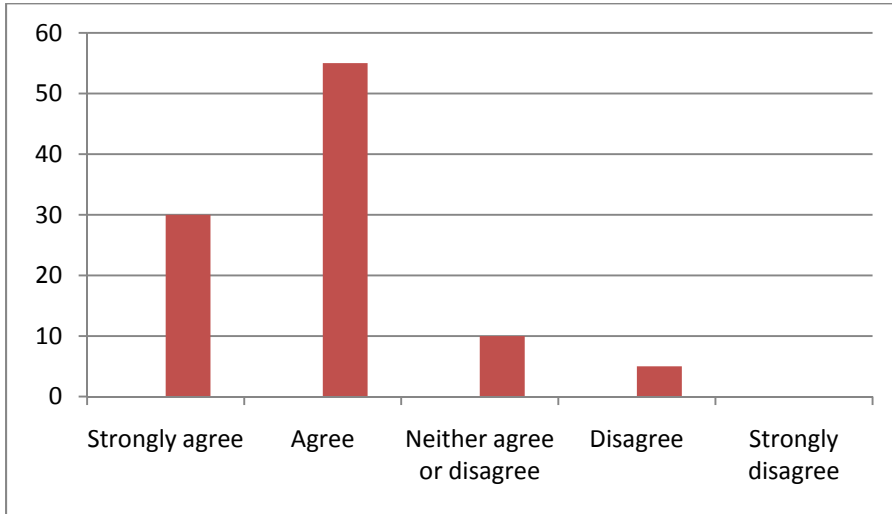
2. A good teacher is one who knows his/her students well and has a rapport with the students.



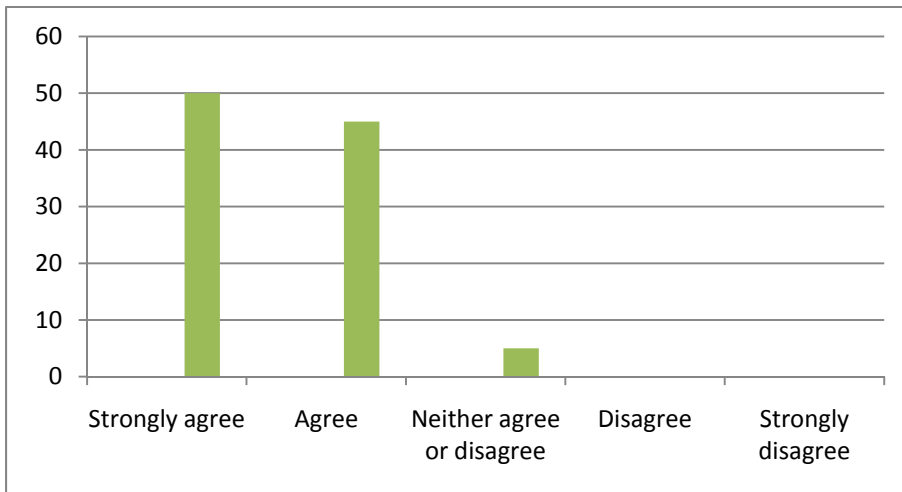
3. A good teacher is one who enables his/her students to produce good academic results.



4. Every student is reachable; it is a teacher’s obligation to see to it that every student makes academic progress.



5. A good teacher provides a variety of learning experiences to accommodate the needs of the students.



Question 10. (Open-ended question) Describe an obstacle or dilemma that you faced in your work and the strategies that you used to overcome them.

Codes for Dilemmas described	Codes for strategies described
<p>DS – Dilemma related to students’ learning, motivation and behavior in class.</p> <p>DT – Dilemma related to lack of time or adjusting priorities in view of time constraints.</p> <p>DI – Dilemma related to teacher’s instruction or adjusting priorities in view of high-stakes tests.</p> <p>DP – Dilemma related to parents’ involvement.</p> <p>DA – Dilemma related to school administration and school/ department initiatives</p> <p>DC – Dilemma related to collegial relationships</p>	<p>SC – Strategy related to communicating with stakeholders in order to understand the issue, encourage or establish rapport</p> <p>ST – Strategy related to finding time outside of curriculum hours or responding in a timely fashion</p> <p>SI – Strategy related to adapting instructional strategies, improving teaching materials, assignments / assessment</p> <p>SS – Strategy related to structural changes in the classroom or school</p> <p>SM – Strategy related to changing one’s mindset or perception</p>

No.	Comments (Categorized as Dilemma and Strategy by researcher)	Dilemma	Strategies
1	<p>Dilemma: A few students in my class were sometimes not attentive and were sometimes late for class. They did not appear to take to scolding well.</p> <p>Strategies: I tried the soft approach; I let go a bit after finding out how some colleagues dealt with the situation. I try not to pick on these few students too much. I realise for some of these students, the soft approach seem to work better.</p>	DS	<p>SC</p> <p>SC</p> <p>SM</p>
2	<p>Dilemma: Declining interest in learning CL among students</p> <p>Strategies:</p> <p>1) Establish rapport, infuse fun, engage students in interactive learning activities</p> <p>2) Set goal with students, get them committed and work towards the goal together. Set time-line for attainment of goal at different stages of learning, eg. sec3-B4;sec4-A2</p> <p>3) Assign students with work that hones their language skills (70-80% exam-oriented)</p> <p>4) Encourage students to press on, as there is a steep learning curve when they are trying to break through.</p> <p>5) Review performance of students periodically, and take timely follow-up actions.</p> <p>6) Celebrate little success, praise them for good efforts put in and improvements made.</p> <p>7) Diplomatically provide HONEST feedback to students on their AFIs. General concerns could be addressed in class. If AFI is peculiar to certain individuals, would be better to discuss with each student on one-to-one basis.</p> <p>8) General guiding principle: Teach-Review (on-going process)</p>	DS	<p>SC, SI</p> <p>SI</p> <p>SC</p> <p>ST</p> <p>SC</p> <p>SC</p>
3	<p>Dilemma: Having little time/opportunity to interact with the pupils and giving them constant feedback about their performance, both behaviourally and</p>	DT	Not stated

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	academically.		
4	<p>Dilemma: The need to differentiate and cater to the diverse learning abilities of 40 students in one class is very challenging.</p> <p>Strategies: Very often, will need to spend time outside the allocated curriculum time to work with students in smaller groups. However, the challenge is also to find the time as the after-school schedule for both students and myself are usually packed with many other activities.</p>	DS DT	DT
5	<p>Dilemma: Whether to give out test papers in random order, or from the highest to the lowest mark.</p> <p>Strategies: Announce the names of the students with the top 5 marks in class. Instead of giving out the rest of the papers in order of ranking, just let the class know what the average score and lowest score is to help students have a gauge on how they have fared.</p>	DI	DI
6	<p>Dilemma: Many students were disinterested in character education lessons as they were not considered an academic subject.</p> <p>Strategies: Make lesson materials and discussions relevant to students, and more importantly, cultivate a good relationship with students who are then better able to understand where I am coming from, and the purpose behind these lessons.</p>	DS	SI SC
7	<p>Dilemma: Students in my school are not academically inclined and are not motivated to put in effort in their Humanities subjects hence the results suffer.</p> <p>Strategies: We band them according to their abilities and I take the tail-end classes. I use acronyms, Social Studies cards with drilling methods to get the students to remember the contents.</p>	DS	SS SI
8	<p>Dilemma: Working with tight deadlines and competing demands of admin and student. Teaching takes up a lot of personal time. Hard to find balance unless you have supportive principal and school culture.</p> <p>Strategies: Finding the right fit may be the answer. One is able to do different things at different times of one's life, and I think it is important not to be exhausted.</p>	DT	SM
9	<p>Dilemma: Short time frame to accomplish teaching objectives.</p> <p>Strategies: Devise a variety of teaching methods, including converting suitable topics to e-learning topics for students can learn at their own time. Classroom time would then be better utilised for more meaningful discussions.</p>	DT, DI	DI
10	<p>Dilemma: A parent who supports his child even when shown evidence that the child had seriously violated school rules.</p> <p>Strategies: Explain to parent rationale for the school rule and why it is important for child to learn while in school rather than the real world. Also, explain how cross messaging to child (ie from school and home) is a potentially confusing to child.</p>	DP	SC SC
11	<p>Dilemma: I find it a challenge during every year's year-end promotion exercise to</p>	DA	

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	<p>determine who should be promoted/ advanced and who should be retained. While we have very clear structures and processes how this is to be done, guidelines from the Ministry and also varying standards set by school leaders blur these parameters. Sometimes, students who clearly have not made the mark are advanced/promoted, and some others who are of the same situation are not.</p> <p>Strategies: deeper dialogues with staff on the important, to set up intervention measures early to help students who are struggling with their work clearer boundaries to deal with such "grey" areas detaching teachers' emotions on their views whether the student should be promoted/retained and focusing instead on the child and working with the family to ensure that the next course of action will be a best way forward.</p>		<p>SC SS</p>
12	<p>Dilemma: How to manage the balance between preparing students for exams and for critical exploration</p> <p>Strategies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Timing to allow for both: Identified when certain blocks of time and activities allow for each - students get to have practice in both in the course of the year 2. Infused critical exploration & exam learning into same lessons - planning of lessons to achieve both objectives in lessons 3. Learning from others - observed, asked and learnt from other teachers, especially senior teachers, on how they manage to accomplish this with students 4. Work with others - worked with a team to discuss this issue, design lessons and activities, and review them 5. Teachable moments outside class time - Used time outside of class to talk to talk to students and explore critical exploration. Sometimes, time in class is prioritized for exam preparation. Strategy was to accept it and look for other avenues to do critical exploration. 	DI	<p>SS SI SC SC, SI ST</p>
13	<p>Dilemma: I always aim to teach students in a way so that they will have the passion for the subject. But given the demands of a high-stakes examination, this can sometimes be challenging.</p> <p>Strategies: For me, I would aim to strike a balance by negotiating the dynamic tension between that of being an interactive teacher vs. an expert teacher. I tried to think of ways to make the lessons as interesting as possible, yet maintaining the rigor of the subject. Tasks and questions are carefully designed with me modelling problem solving and mathematical thinking processes.</p>	DI	<p>SM SI</p>
14	<p>Dilemma: Motivation level of my students in my teaching subject.</p> <p>Strategy: Help the students to appreciate and see the beauty of the subject.</p>	DS	
15	<p>Strategy: Focusing on develop the student in a holistic manner and not only focusing on academic achievement.</p>	Not stated	SM
16	<p>Dilemma: Sometimes it is almost impossible to reach 1 or 2 difficult students in a class. As a result, sometimes, I have to leave these students behind and focus on the rest of the students who are willing to learn.</p>	DS	

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	<p>Strategies: I found it helpful to spend time with such students outside the classroom context in order to draw them in. It was also helpful to talk to the class and get a few more responsible and friendly students to befriend and bring the difficult students along. A combination of strategies seem to work best.</p>		ST SC
17	<p>Dilemma: How do you handle colleagues who are older and have been in the school far longer than you (or most people) and kept on exerting his/her presence and 'authority' to insist on having things his/her way? I don't have a good handle on this, but I try to understand his/her point of view, and also try to work the logic of the other perspective out so that s/he can see the issue from the other point of view.</p> <p>Strategy: Sometimes I let some issues go, sometimes I pick up and have an airing on this first before having a final say on it.</p>	DC	SM, SC
18	<p>Dilemma: Once, a number of students in my class did not complete the homework that was assigned to them.</p> <p>Strategies: Both the hard and soft approach was used - first, I checked to see if they had finished their work, and after that, scolded the class for not completing the work. The next day, I explained to them the reason for my reaction and the expectations that I had for them, given their potential. At the same time, I tried to incorporate more interactive and competitive activities like games to raise their interest in the subject. I also got the class to set targets and goals for themselves in order for them to see the regular work done as being purposeful and useful in their learning.</p>	DS	SC SI SI
19	<p>Dilemma: Students not motivated in studies.</p> <p>Strategy: Instead of teaching him/her on how to solve the problem, I actually did a few test or worksheet to boost his/her self-worth and esteem. By doing so, the confidence level will increase and the student became more willing to go for the extra mile.</p>	DS	SI
20	<p>Dilemma: Tests-oriented scheme of work set by department. There were class tests every other week that the students barely had time to internalise the skills/knowledge that they learnt. These class tests were past-yr papers chosen by the dept and they do not necessarily test the skills that were taught.</p> <p>My strategy: Identify the key mistakes made by students in a previous test and modify the class test papers such that they will be tested on the same set of skills/knowledge.</p>	DA	SI