

Developing Teachers at the Pinnacle of Profession: The Singapore Practice

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Abstract

Background: Master teachers in Singapore have been recognised on the basis of their invaluable contribution in their field of teaching, and are deemed to be at the pinnacle of their career. A national programme for incumbent and potential master teachers, Advanced Senior Teachers Programme (ASTP), was inaugurated in 2005. Conducted by the National Institute of Education, an institute of the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, it serves to address the professional development needs of this special group of senior teachers.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to present the practice and experiences with regard to the professional development of incumbent and potential master teachers in Singapore.

Comments: Three cohorts of participants successfully completed the professional development programme. There was country-specific involvement by the university and the ministry of education. Based on feedback and intensive professional engagement, measures were taken to rectify mistakes and also improvements made for the subsequent two cohorts since the initial commencement of the programme.

Conclusion: The Singapore practice has offered a formal professional development platform for incumbent and potential master teachers. Policy makers and practitioners alike could benefit from the Singapore experiential practice of providing such a programme, and could better pre-empt problems and deliver training needs appropriate for their existing educational contexts.

Keywords: Singapore, master teachers, professional development.

專業頂峰的教師專業發展：新加坡的經驗

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摘要

背景：新加坡的特級教師是在教學上曾作出十分有價值的貢獻，在教學事業上已至頂峰的教師。2005年，一個為現任特級教師與潛能特級教師，由南洋理工大學屬下的國立教育學院所設計的國家項目：進階高級教師課程正式開課，以滿足這批特殊的資深教師的專業發展學要。

目的：本論文是闡述發展現任與潛能特級教師的實踐經驗。

評論：有第三批學員完成專業發展課程。大專學府與教育部共同參與這項國家項目。根據回饋與密集的參與度，課程設計者採取了適當的防禦性策略。在第一屆課程完成後，也持續改進了後兩屆的課程。

結論：這項新加坡的課程為現任與潛能的特級教師提供了一個專業發展的正式平臺。決策者與實踐者可以從新加坡的這個項目中獲得借鑒，以便根據本身的教育實況，更好地預見問題，提供更加符合培訓需要的課程。

關鍵字：新加坡、特教教師、專業發展。

Introduction

Teachers are at the frontline of education policies and are inevitably subjected to increasing demands in an ever evolving educational environment of change. In Singapore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) envisioned the concept of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) in 1997 to signify a nimble education system nurturing a future generation capable of facing challenges of the 21 century. On its heels was the 2003 call for Innovation and Enterprise (I&E) in schools. Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) was initiated in 2004, to encourage greater effectiveness and efficiency in quality teaching, with an incorporation of aspects to engender life-long learning in students.

Currently, there exists an emphasis on being “flexible and diverse” and a “broad-based education” (Ministry of Education, 2009) for the provision of greater choice and a more holistic approach to student development. Such continual improvements in education necessitate the development of teachers who learn as they teach, in particular, the master teachers who are the senior teacher leaders expected to be at the forefront of knowledge in their subject area and at the cutting edge of ongoing change.

There is no dearth of literature on utilising the vast potential of master teachers to enhance the quality of the education service as a whole or directly assist in the development of individual teachers who are yet to be competent. The numerous publications include, for instance, the role of master teachers to continually seek opportunities to network and collaborate with other professionals to establish professional communities of learning (Holm and Horn, 2003), the design and implementation of formal programmes to take advantage of master teachers’ best practices in teacher professional development as

exemplary practitioners (Foster, 2004; Kent, Feldman and Hayes, 2009), the engagement of mentors to co-creating meaningful professional relationship for the benefit of the protégé, mentor and the education system (Lim, 2009a), the reiteration that professional development support from mentor teachers can foster improvements in multiple domains of teaching quality (Domitrovich, Gest, Gill, Bierman, Welsh, & Jones, 2009), and the service of excellent teachers and mentors as educational incendiaries with their passion and passing on a legacy (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Low, Lim and Lim, 2004; Zarra, 2004). However, the focus on designing and implementation of a formal non-commercial programme solely for the purpose of developing master school teachers who are already at the pinnacle of their profession appears to be relatively lacking in literature.

Pertinent Background of the Programme

The National Institute of Education (NIE), which is constituted as part of the Nanyang Technology University in Singapore (NTU), plays a major role in providing pre-service and in-service programmes for educators in partnership with the MOE. Such partnership is beneficial as the university faculty are expected to highlight the relevant local and global cutting edge research and practices in their area of expertise. Senior teacher leaders need to have a good grasp of contemporary issues and policies to be able to lead other teachers. This requires surfacing and challenging current assumptions of teaching and learning. Such a quest will invariably illuminate values and beliefs fundamental to their being and becoming as teacher leaders.

Acknowledging the needs of incumbent and potential master teachers, a programme termed Advanced Senior Teachers Programme (ASTP)

serves to provide a platform for senior teacher leaders to expand their roles and to take on higher teacher leadership responsibilities. Specifically, the programme aims to build expertise competence among senior teacher leaders; enhance capacity to lead and mentor, taking cognizance of the prime focus on continual learning and evolving dynamism; as well as to create new knowledge and innovation in teaching and learning.

Though the emphasis of the programme is essentially local, the learning is set in an international context so as to broaden the horizon of these teacher leaders at the top of their career, as well as to ensure that the educational developments in Singapore are progressive from a global perspective.

The programme comprises components that serve as its structure. The first component is termed Learning Teams. Conscious attempt is made to provide every participant with the best possible maximal learning. The intake for each cohort is not more than twenty five senior teacher leaders. Each Learning Team comprises approximately five to six participants. With the involvement of selected senior university faculty members, participants are actively encouraged to experience intensive learning engagement through generative conversation under such structured team settings.

Secondly, there is Action Learning. Action learning is utilised as a means of education that entails learning by surfacing and acting upon relevant problems encountered by the senior teacher leaders. This involves the process of information exchange for practical solutions in the engagement of realistic project. Learning by doing and learning from significant others are pertinent features in this component.

Independent Learning is the third component. This component serves to provide opportunities for the senior teacher leaders to take charge of their own learning agenda for their professional development. Numerous options are available; for instance, they have the option of inviting relevant speakers or discuss an area of professional study to develop greater insight. The range of topics can be potentially wide-ranging, such as teacher leadership, mentoring, innovative pedagogies, personnel development, organisational change, policy analysis, as well as the complexities of school programme implementation.

The fourth component is Classroom-based Learning. Classroom-based approach is adopted to enhance delivery of specific concepts that are fundamental to the understanding and appreciation of relevant practice. Using the platform of on-line learning, participants can also have the option of access to the virtual learning communities and able to tap on the power of instantaneous learning.

Further, there is also the Individual and Team Presentations Component. Participants engage in a seminar style professional discourse. They present their learning from their reflections, lecturers, readings, and various dimensions that expand their horizons. Participants are expected to make presentations on their team project as well as their individual learning.

Exploring Key Notions in Teacher Leadership

The participants are challenged to explore the pervasiveness and fluidity of mentoring in its transcendence beyond time, distance and space. The depiction of conception and subsequent evolving notions of mentoring facilitates distilling the essence

of mentoring. It also includes the complexities of mentoring in theory and in practice. The fluidity of mentoring could embrace learning relationships that pertain to cerebral learning, competence learning, as well as transformational learning. Frameworks of benefits at multi-levels are re-explored. The relationship-centred nature of mentoring and its inherent learning promote values that are people and learning centred. The teacher leaders are challenged beyond the skills component, and to explore the learning process and the learning effects. The focus is also upon developing a sense of competence, confidence and commitment as teacher leaders in the paradigm of mentoring. Authentic mentoring is hard to fault as the icon of the pinnacle of influence. As such, its systematic impact on culture generation affecting the core of education is also re-examined, in the continual quest towards the fostering of innovative values in times of constant change.

There is also the exploration in the policies and curriculum dimension, in particular, with respect to the local thrust. It offers the principles and practices, inclusive of curriculum structure and design. The role of the teacher and the phases of professional development are surfaced. There is developing of a lesson observation rubric for practical utility. In sum, there is the creation of a curriculum model, encompassing the illumination of educational policies, philosophy, and the enhancement of student impact. One illustration adopted is the curricula of drama, visual arts and music, where the senior teacher leaders are engaged in the following: discussion of ideas and issues that pertain to drama and music education within the curriculum; significance, meaning and application of art to advance student development; and recent developments in the related fields.

The exploration of educational technology in this programme encompasses the promotion of self-directed learning, collaborative learning, knowledge building, engaged learning, as well as higher order thinking skills in a pleasurable learning setting. The first aspect involves exploration of an emergent technological tool that supports the rapid collaborative knowledge building skill. The subsequent aspect involves the adoption of digital games for engaged learning and the promotion of higher order integrated process skills. It serves to offer significant learning experiences that engage participants in their own learning. A spectrum of facilitation strategies are selectively adopted, such as dialogues, discussions, forums, debates, case studies, role-play, simulations, and ample opportunities are provided for the teacher leaders to present their own work or team work in collaboration with peers.

The participants are also actively encouraged to explore the preparation for teacher leadership, parallelism, and teacher-leader action research. Preparation for teacher leadership incorporates the development approach, values, and student learning enhancement. Parallelism concerns building school capacity through shared leadership. Teacher-leader action research involves teacher-practitioner as researcher, as well as understanding, implementing, and leading school-wide collaborative action research. The university faculty facilitate discussions pertaining to teacher leadership, for instance, the ability to enhance student learning, the power of teaching to generate new perspectives and meaningful aspects, and the quest to improve the quality of life in schools and communities. The teacher leaders are challenged to analyse, integrate, and create knowledge with regard to their previous, ongoing and future action research at school, cluster or national level.

Discussion

The practice of programme implementation for three cohorts of incumbent and potential master teachers in Singapore has surfaced several pertinent learning experiences. Firstly, it is significant to engage the appropriate key university faculty. The three key academic staff members concerned had extensive involvement in external programmes for overseas participants as well as in-service programmes for school personnel. The programmes they had been involved in range from those for subject heads, level heads, heads of department, deputy principals, principals and superintendents. They were also award recipients of the National Institute of Education Excellence in Teaching and/or award recipients of the Nanyang Technological University Excellence in Teaching. Such wealth of exposure on the part of these Learning Team Leaders proved to be immensely useful in facilitating the professional growth of the incumbent and potential master teachers. The participants were very mature adult learners and in general, presented their queries and challenges in a confident manner. The faculty Learning Team Leaders would have difficulties leading the participants if they had been less experienced or competent.

Secondly, the academic staff members involved in the programme must have the professional ability to meet the learning needs of the senior teachers. The academic staff members were either hand-picked for their expertise in the desired field or recommended by their respective Heads of Academic Group for their ability to engage senior educators in professional learning. Besides academic qualities, years of relevant experience and a commendable teaching record, one of the criteria for selection included prior engagement in the relevant research or projects that

were of practical significance to the work-life of the teachers.

Thirdly, planning for the programme has to start early, preferably six months to a year in advance. The desired faculty staff members usually had other simultaneous commitments and inviting them in advance could better secure their consent and engagement. If the faculty staff members were not heads of their respective academic groups themselves, there was also the necessity to request for their heads' approval in the deployment of the selected staff in the programme. Giving the faculty ample notice in advance for the engagement of their service could also allow them sufficient time to prepare for their interactions with the teacher leaders.

Fourthly, direct contact and follow-up on administrative matters with the relevant Ministry of Education officer-in-charge is important. The process required diligence in following-up as there were changes in the personnel involved with each cohort, and significant aspects with regard to the programme had to be communicated effectively. The participants of the programme were busy work-wise at various levels, for instance, at school, cluster, national and international levels. Considering the heavy official tasks commitments of the incumbent and potential master teachers, sufficient notice of their selection to the programme by the Ministry of Education could alleviate unnecessary difficulties encountered in the workplace due to their absence to engage in professional development.

Fifthly, the senior teachers can ride on learning autonomy. The participants of the programme were experienced organisers of events in their work. They had immense capacity for meaningful interactions within and beyond curriculum time with their classmates. It could help to provide some autonomy

in the way they designed and organised their own learning. The autonomy enhanced a greater sense of responsibility towards their learning. Such a move surfaced the liveliness of each cohort as a whole, in particular, the self-designed presentations in the presence of their learning facilitators and team mates.

The next learning point pertains to the need for appropriate responsiveness to relevant feedback from participants and subsequent review of the programme. The cohorts were not identical and could illuminate unexpected learning needs that challenged existing assumptions. It was pertinent to acknowledge their experiences and create opportunities for faculty staff to leverage valuable sites and sources of learning. Invaluable feedback obtained from all participants of the three cohorts primarily centred upon key learning points, clarity in thought processes, desire for new dimensions in programme, and plans for future developments. The focus of desired change in programme delivery was on enhancing the professional connections in teaching and learning between the faculty staff and participants.

Further, such programme for incumbent and potential master teachers can effectively generate probabilities for the teacher leaders to learn together and extend their networks of learning. As the participants progressed in their learning among peers, they consolidated their newly established relationship bonds. The financial sponsorship of the Singapore Ministry of Education for their full-time one-month study offered learning space for professional engagement. Their superiors in the educational hierarchy were explicitly encouraged to refrain from enlisting the service of these key staff members during their involvement in the programme. Under a learning setting away from their demanding routine in schools, clusters or national levels, these senior

teachers could better concentrate on their professional development.

Limitations

This is not an evaluation of the Advanced Senior Teachers Programme. The focus is on practical experiences gained through conducting professional development for incumbent and potential master teachers in Singapore. There is also no attempt to assert that the practice and perceptions can be generalised to all in-service professional programmes in Singapore.

Conclusion

The practice of programme delivery for incumbent and potential master teachers was an original and inaugural move in the history of teacher development in Singapore. The participants of the programme were well recognised for their teaching in the education service and had high expectations. They were critical of faculty staff members who could be better in attending to their professional development needs. Likewise, they expressed their appreciation of those who had the competence, confidence and commitment to lead them in higher learning. Excellent teachers cum mentors engage in ongoing professional development (Langer, 2000; Lim, 2009b, Smittle, 2003; Zarra, 2004). As formal in-service tertiary programmes for master teachers are relatively lacking in literature, such a Singapore experience could be informative and be of practical use to programme developers, education ministry officials, tertiary faculty staff and other interested parties concerned with the professional growth of teachers at the pinnacle of their career.

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