

# Overview

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Many, if not all, teachers enter the teaching profession with the ideals of the simplicity and pleasures of working with students in order to make a meaningful difference in their lives. Although working with students has its fair share of challenges given the myriad cultural, social and economic make-up of the students we teach, many a time, teachers who end up leaving the profession, or have at some point contemplated switching careers, do so due to challenging circumstances involving relationships or incidents with their peers and superiors such as a department head or even the Principal. Part 2 brings to light the significant role of collegial support in our work as teachers, and illuminates the strong emotions that are evoked, both positive and negative, in such interactions. This overview, interlaced with excerpts from the narratives presented in this section, draws attention to how the nature of collegial relationships influences teachers attitudes towards work at different stages of their career trajectories, as well as probable underlying factors that influence the nature of such relationships.

Most, if not all, narratives in this section, as well as those in this book, start with Huberman's survival and discovery stage as beginning teachers acquaint themselves with the actual ropes of the

profession, a great leap from the theoretical foundations and brief practicum stint offered in pre-service teacher education. During this difficult period in learning to work in a school environment, the nature and level of support they could receive from colleagues, and hence the working and personal relationships they form, play an important role in determining how the early years in teaching are traversed. Many of the teachers, whose stories are shared in this book, emphasised the need of good mentorship to help novice teachers navigate through the chalky waters of the beginning years.

For instance, in Vimi Sambwani's reflection of her professional journey as an educator and school leader, she recounted the vital role her mentor had played in the beginning years of her life as a novice teacher, which formed the rudder of her professional growth as an educator.

“Over the weeks, I began to realise the importance of a mentor in my teaching. Mdm Zubeidah became a powerful influence in my life. She began sharing the positive and negative aspects of the classroom and I was extremely grateful for her candid ideas ... The truth was that Mdm Zubeidah did not lead herself to believe that she had nothing to learn from a novice teacher. Her humility strengthened our relationship within our small school community. We spoke honestly with each other on paper and we were able to break down the usual solitary isolation felt by a teacher wet behind the ears, and this helped to expand our professional friendship.”

The willingness for experienced teachers to wholeheartedly welcome and guide beginning teachers on board the boat of teaching also featured in Song Hwei Fang's “The Accidental Teacher”, in which she shared how her colleague's encouragement of her potential and allowing her to take positions of responsibility had helped her develop a thunderous passion in the field of education and eventually transformed her into a school leader.

The working climate created by the waves of interactions of other teachers in our teaching voyage is also essential. The following excerpt from Sheikh's “The Looking Glass Self” illustrates how having a collegial working environment supported a beginning

teacher pass the disappointment and struggle in being posted to a department not of his choice or expectations.

“I was disappointed with my work allocation, as I knew that it meant that I had three classes of English marking. Even before I went through the torture, I had heard of this cruel and unusual punishment, which had led to very high attrition rates amongst English teachers. Surprisingly, this disgruntlement soon turned into a growing sense of wonder and joy at being an English teacher due to the amiable, dynamic nature of the English teachers in the department .... I thoroughly enjoyed the contact that I had with these personalities even though it could be barb-filled standardisation meetings or even the pressure cooker environment of setting an exam paper.”

Conversely, the gradual disintegration of the department of his closely-knit colleagues resulted in a complete reversal in the level of enthusiasm and vigour at how he perceived work. While his tasks and daily activities remained the same, the change in the social environment made the same routine unbearable. The reverberations of this sentiment are strongly felt throughout the other narratives presented in this section.

In addition, it can be seen in these teacher narratives (as well as those found in other parts of the book) that teachers' career trajectories are non-linear; for instance, each time a new event occurs in the professional (or even the personal) life of the teacher, he or she may be thrust to the survival stage all over again. This includes accepting a promotion, teaching a different demographic group of students, moving to a new school, and even working with a new supervisor or colleague. A fitting illustration of the recurrence of the survival and discovery is from Fatimah Othman's narrative titled “Leadership: The Hardware vs The Heartware”, wherein the transfer of a Vice Principal to a new school made the author feel as if she were starting all over again.

“I felt that I was revisiting the Survival Phase all over again in terms of overcoming the challenges in the new school context, which included having to adapt to a new school culture, new colleagues,

new job responsibilities as well as to a new Principal, all of which had different expectations of me than the school that I was from. The new learning curve was steep and painful, to say the least, but nothing had prepared me for the bitter experience I learnt about leadership.”

Thus, the complexity arising from relationships may arise at any juncture in our career trajectory. Remaining focused or effectively resolving a collegial relationship is not as straightforward as it sounds. The root cause can often be that of power.

Similarly, the fear to express one’s disagreement with a superior stems from several factors, one of which is the nature of the appraisal system in schools that affects teachers’ performance ranking and hence the size of our rice bowls. It is clear that such power relationships hinder genuine open communication. For instance, in Yee Teng’s narrative, “Sunshine after the Rain”, a miscommunication with the Reporting Officer (RO) had caused the teacher to decide not to join the department as a subject specialist for fear of the adverse impact of her relationship with her RO on her performance ranking.

“She did not clarify and was not interested in my explanation. Her emotions had overtaken the willingness to reason and listen ... I would imagine she would now think differently of me as she felt betrayed that I did not inform her of my intentions. I also wondered if it would adversely affect my performance and relationship with her as a superior.”

It is evident that the notion of clear and honest communication, as well as the ability to separate or clarify the personal and the professional, begs our attention as education professionals. I posit that such an endeavour for clarity and honesty warrants a change in mind-set and being true to our identity as teachers. This includes having a disposition for reflection and introspection and constantly reaffirming or reassessing our fundamental purpose for entering the field of education. Personally, I have realised the importance of exercising patience in the face of adversity, humility

notwithstanding our position and prowess, and respect for the feelings of others in all our dealings. This was something that dawned upon me during the process of being part of the editorial team of this book, in my working relationship with one of my fellow team members. Incidentally, this thought has been appropriately and accurately expressed in narrative, “To Stand on My Own Two Feet”, where Ting Ting, a Chinese Language teacher, reflected upon the turmoil in her relationship with her department head.

“... the very first thing that I see emerging so loudly throughout this narrative is, surprisingly, ‘I’. I have always been regarded as (and thought so myself too) a respectful and modest person who is always considerate of other people’s feelings. Thus it was rather uncomfortable for me as I saw the egoistic notion of the “I” being so prevalent throughout ... it seemed that just because I thought I was doing the ‘right thing’ in wanting to improve on what I thought was not done correctly in the teaching of CL, I seemed to expect everyone else to accept my ideas readily and to share my enthusiasm; if not, then there would be something wrong with these people.”

The predomination of the “egoistic self” in our dealings with others sometimes seems to get the better of us, as if it were some indomitable force. Not only does it propel us in our quest for power or domination, it can also provide the excuse to avoid accepting responsibility for our actions and taking a humble stand. It could compel us to believe that we are, or rather “I am always right” or that “I can do no wrong”. Rarely do we consider the position of others whom we interact with; rarely do we pause to empathise with them.

To conclude, the incidents recounted in the narratives presented in Part 2 span the experiences of teachers at different stages of their career trajectories and at varying positions of leadership. These episodes include relationships with mentors, peers, subordinates, as well as with those in superior leadership positions, and reflect both positive and negative encounters. In all cases, the

notions of power, communication, and identity pervade in varying degrees throughout each of the narratives. Examining them a notch deeper would reveal the notion of the meaning and purpose of being a teacher and how it influences at a subconscious level our decisions and interactions with others.