

School of Education

**Teacher Empowerment: An Interpretive Study of the Experience of
Asian Migrant Teachers in Western Australia**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published by any person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Signature: 
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ABSTRACT

This research was prompted by arguments about the importance of empowerment in professional praxis of school practitioners and related legislations, namely, the *Better Schools*' reform in 1987 and the WA Charter of Multiculturalism in 2004, and by persistent feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy I had experienced as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA Government schools. Attributing cause to others is always easier than looking to ourselves for the root of our problems. Guided by the innovative concept of a research multi-paradigmatic design space, I adapted methods from the interpretivist-constructivist and critical paradigms, and embarked on a process of critical self-reflection aimed at gaining an understanding of my feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy. Complementing this autoethnographic study, self-reflections of three other Asian migrant school practitioners were included to gauge the degree of consonance of feelings amongst us as I shared my lived experience with them. The sharing of our experiences over a four-year period revealed that lack of respect and support from key stakeholders of the school system had been one of the root causes of our negative feelings, and that this perception was related to cultural dissonance between our collectivist Asian culture and the more individualistic culture of WA school communities. A natural response to the findings was a search for ways of minimizing the cultural dissonance. This research is as much a self-initiated change as a 'political outreach' aimed at instigating further discussion and debate as a catalyst for system-wide policy initiative to address the issue of cultural dissonance which is considered to be a key to reducing of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst Asian migrant teachers in WA Government schools. This research has been an emancipating and enlightening personal experience but it was not without limitations and problems.

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CHAPTER 1

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”¹

INTRODUCTION

Disempowerment and inefficacy can be considered as two of the most common feelings of migrants of ethnic minorities in Australia. Some would have internalized these feelings as a normal part of life living in a ‘foreign’ country. However, a sizable number would have attributed these feelings to the ‘others’ in the country. Although others, particularly the majority, may have contributed to the feelings, it is my contention that Asian migrants are not entirely free from being the root cause of their own negative feelings.

Our natural human tendency is often to attribute others as the root cause of our problems. However, it is not until we undertake critical self reflection that we can come to appreciate the picture on the other side of the coin – that we are indeed part of our own problems. Critical self reflection is a process of ‘soul searching’, aimed at coming to terms with ourselves as part of the solution of our own problems by foregrounding our ‘hidden self’. Founded on the method of critical self- reflection, this research thesis was designed as my attempt to reflect critically on myself in the hope of enlightening myself about strong feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy that I experienced as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA Government schools. During a process of prolonged critical self-reflection, I generated personal texts describing my experiences and stories as a migrant school practitioner in WA Government schools in Chapter 4. By sharing my experiences and stories with other migrant teachers (the research participants) coming from cultures and backgrounds similar to mine, I initiated critical self reflection amongst these teachers. The sharing of our personal texts helped us to uncover our ‘hidden selves’, and differences and

¹ Jesus Christ’s teaching about judging others: Matthew 7:3, the Holy Bible

similarities in our experiences as Asian migrant school practitioners in WA Government schools. Our prolonged interaction and collaboration enabled us to paint a background picture of our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as migrant teachers.

This research brought to light the complexity of the issues involved in the background to my feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as a school practitioner. My critical self-reflection was the starting point of a long drawn out process of political maneuvering aimed at shifting the big picture of the praxis of Asian migrant teachers. Embedded in the process was a range of micro- and meso-political considerations that I needed to negotiate in order to be effective in this ‘political outreach’ as an agent of change. Such political maneuvering finds support in Jones’ (2005) contention that research is usually aimed at propagating a ‘political’ message to all who are concerned about a certain issue. In this case, it was the issue of overcoming feelings of being inefficacious as an Asian migrant school practitioner. Being political here refers to influencing people and instigating them to engage in debate and discussion in order to bring about change. In this way, researchers are not much different from politicians who are change oriented in their attitudes.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Western Australia Charter of Multiculturalism

The announcement of the Western Australia Charter of Multiculturalism by Dr Geoff Gallop in 2004, the then Premier and Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests of Western Australia, has been a driving force behind this research. The Charter fueled my eagerness to embark on a research study in order to make a difference in the life of migrant school practitioners in WA since the Charter is explicit in its objective of “explicitly recognizing that the people of Western Australia are of different linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and promoting their participation in democratic governance within an inclusive society” (Office of

Multiculturalism, 2004, p. 1). The Charter represents a commitment of the State Government to create an inclusive society in WA through flexible service provision in responding “appropriately to the varying needs of communities of different cultures and backgrounds in order to ensure that all people can participate in society” (p. 1). To achieve these objectives, the Charter (p. 4) outlines the Government’s intentions:

- to facilitate the inclusion and empowerment of members of all communities as full and equal members of the Australian community, enjoying the rights and duties of a shared citizen; and
- to remove all barriers to equal participation in, and enjoyment of, all aspects of society – social, political, cultural and economic.

Although the Charter of Multiculturalism refers to the wider society of Western Australia, its implications for the State education system are clearly evident. I see a key implication being an urgent need to cater for diversity through flexible service provision within the education system, particularly within the Government schools in WA, with the corresponding purpose of empowering school practitioners of different cultures and backgrounds so that they can participate fully in all aspects of school life, and become full and equal members of the school community.

The WA Charter of Multiculturalism is also explicit in many other ways in terms of its principles, purposes and objectives. I believe that the driving force behind the Charter was an awareness and a recognition by the State Government that the issue of social equity among the communities of different cultures and backgrounds living in WA needs to be addressed. As an Asian migrant teacher serving in the WA State school system, I am of the opinion that the issue of equity is just as applicable within the schools as in the wider society. Implicit in the Charter is the indication that there is a ‘deficit’ among the members of different communities in the wider society, and my experience tells me that there is a corresponding deficit among the migrant school practitioners of different cultures and backgrounds within the WA State school system. I believe the deficit has prevented some Asian migrant school practitioners from participating fully in the State school system. Furthermore, both self generated and

external barriers may have prevented these migrant teachers from participating fully and enjoying all aspects of their professional life.

The *Better Schools*’ Reform

Although the *Better Schools*’ reform in Western Australia was introduced about twenty years prior to the release of the WA Charter of Multiculturalism, the underlying objectives of the reform and the Charter are similar, that is, empowerment. Nevertheless, there are differences. Although the Reform has direct and mandatory implications for Government schools in WA, it makes no distinction between the cultures and backgrounds of different communities. The implication for the different cultures and backgrounds of school practitioners is largely implicit. The Charter, on the other hand, makes no distinction about context, but has direct implications for different cultures and backgrounds of different communities. The implication for the school setting, though relevant and inclusive, is implicit. Despite differences, these legislations do not differ in terms of the WA Government’s ambition to enhance the empowerment of the people of Western Australia regardless of their cultures, the backgrounds they come from or the occupations they engage in.

Feelings Of Disempowerment And Inefficacy

I believe the announcement of the WA Charter of Multiculturalism and the implementation of the *Better Schools*’ Report were both indicative of the problem of disempowerment amongst people of minority racial groups in the WA school system, in particular the Asian migrant school practitioners and the wider WA society. I also believe that although such feelings could have been evoked by external factors, the internal environment, that is, cultural background, life principles and personal lived experiences could have contributed to the negative feelings.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is little doubt about the importance and hence the need for empowerment of school practitioners. In general, empowered practitioners would be more efficacious within their work context. Empowerment would bring about the creation of an enabling school environment in different areas of school governance and management such as restructuring (Klecker & Loadman, 1998; Martin & Crossland, 2000; Short, 1994), facilitating change implementation (Fullan, 1993; Sarason, 1991; 1996) and improving classroom instruction (Martin & Crossland, 2000; Marks & Lois, 1997; McBride & Skau, 1995). Empowerment is responsible for creating a sense or feeling of efficacy among school practitioners which is the driving force behind the success of their teaching. Teacher empowerment is also the key to professionalism (Dee, Henkin & Duemer, 2003; Katzenmayer & Moller, 2001), connectedness or collegial collaboration (Dee, Henkin & Duemer, 2003; Gaucher & Coffee, 1993; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Spreitzer, 1995; Brandt, 1989) and trust (Nyhan, 2000; Moye, Henkin & Egley, 2005).

Empowerment is indeed imperative if school practitioners are to operate to their full capacity. The research problem of this study was conceived by my perception that despite the legislation of the Charter and the Report more than four and twenty years ago, respectively, my teaching experiences in several WA Government schools tell me that feeling of disempowerment continues to be serious and undiminished. Asian migrant teachers continue to feel disempowered and operate below their potential. The problem of disempowerment may be attributed to external forces, and thus it is easy for us to lament over others as the root cause of our problem. But I believe our internal environment could also have a part in our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as well. I perceive that if we realize we are part of our problems, we can become part of our solution as well. Based on such a perception and in relation to Jurgen Habermas’ Critical Theory (see Chapter Two), this research was conceived as an attempt to examine feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as an Asian migrant school practitioner, in the first instance through critical self-reflection, and subsequently, by sharing and discussing my experiences and stories with other Asian migrant practitioners (i.e. research participants).

THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Associated with the research problem, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To reflect critically on my cultural background, life principles and personal lived experiences to gain a better understanding of myself in relation to my feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA government schools.
2. To share my cultural background, life principles and lived experiences with three other Asian migrant teachers (the research participants) about the negative feelings, and identify any similarities and differences between myself and the research participants.
3. To explore collaboratively the possible root cause of any negative feelings in our professional praxes as Asian migrant school practitioners in WA Government schools.
4. To jointly explore ways of minimizing cultural dissonance between the local culture and ourselves as a means of reducing feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy.
5. To create an awareness of the ‘plight’ of Asian migrant school practitioners in WA Government schools thereby instigating further debate and discussion amongst all stakeholders within the system with the ultimate aim of bringing about change in order to enhance empowerment of school practitioners of Asian cultural background.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How has cultural background, life principles and lived experiences impacted upon the empowerment of school practitioners of Asian cultural background in WA government schools?

Subsidiary Research Questions

1. How has my cultural belief systems and lived experiences impacted upon my feelings as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA government schools?
2. How do other Asian school practitioners feel about being Asian migrant school practitioners in WA government schools?
3. Are there similarities and differences between us in our feelings as Asian migrant school practitioners?
4. What is the message or implication of our critical recounting and self-reflection on our cultural background, life principles and lived experiences?

DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

To facilitate readers’ understanding of this chapter, and of this thesis as a whole, I will now outline the key definitions used and the underlying assumptions in this research. The term ‘teacher empowerment’ is defined as teachers in possession of a mindset and feelings concern with the technical and managerial domains of school life. The former is concern with classroom level issues and the latter with school-wide issues (Angus, 1990; Smyth, 1996). ‘Asian migrant teachers’ are teachers from Southeast Asian

countries who are qualified to teach in Australia schools by Australian standards. They have taught in their respective home countries and have taught or are currently teaching in WA Government schools. The system of education they experienced prior to their arrival in this country is closely associated with that of the British colonial system.

One of the underlying assumptions of this research is that there are feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy among Asian migrant teachers consequent of their cultural background, life principles and lived experiences prior to their arrival in WA. Empowerment is assumed:

- to be beneficial to Asian migrant teachers as it would help them to achieve their full potential in their professional praxes; and
- to be helpful in retaining them in the WA State School system, helping to alleviate the current problem of teacher shortage.

THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

A paradigm can be considered as the way in which a group of people come to perceive reality. In the context of research, a paradigm is the way that researchers gain an understanding of the reality of the lived experience of a group of people within their social context. The task involves examination and analysis of the complex and intertwined assumptions, beliefs, values and habitual practices of both the researcher and the researched. The complexity involved in gauging the reality of Asian migrant school practitioners in WA Government schools requires a research paradigm that encompasses the elements and facets of feelings about disempowerment. There is not a single paradigm that would be all-compassing. In its place, a conceptual paradigm that embraces key elements of various known paradigms was deemed to be appropriate and thus adopted for this research. The idea of a conceptual paradigm for this research originated from Taylor’s (2008) concept of multi-paradigmatic research design spaces for cultural studies in which key elements of both interpretative and critical paradigms were drawn upon to create a hybrid or conceptual methodology for exploration and

intervention aimed at improving conditions in local context. This conceptual paradigm is described and explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

A wide range of research has been conducted by education change researchers to indicate the importance and thus the need to empower teachers. In a time of teacher shortage and considering the objectives of the WA Charter of Multiculturalism, initiatives to retain migrant teachers in WA public schools have become ever more urgent. One such initiative would be the creation of an empowering work environment for Asian migrant school practitioners to operate in. This would involve not only the physical environment, but more importantly, I believe, the psychological environment. One of the tasks involved in the creation of such an environment is to identify key sources of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst the Asian migrant school practitioners within their work environments. This research focuses on the cultural background, life principles and lived experiences of Asian migrant teachers associated with negative feelings, thereby enabling we Asian migrant teachers to come to terms with both ourselves and with the system.

This research has been of high personal significance as the recounting of my lived experience has uncovered the source of my feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as an Asian migrant school practitioner. It lies with my collectivist cultural background which is in dissonance with the seemingly individualist culture of the school contexts I have worked in. The self-discovery has not only enlightened me about my ‘hidden self’ but, more importantly, has emancipated me from my ‘false world of existence’ wherein others were attributed as the primary source of my negative feelings. This self-discovery has enabled me to come to terms with my cultural belief system and has enabled me to be more open-minded and more adaptive to the local culture in which I operate as an Asian migrant school practitioner.

This research has had a similar impact on three other Asian migrant teachers with a similar cultural background as a result of us sharing our feelings, experiences

and beliefs. Through critical self-reflection, the collaboratively generated consensus about our feelings has been a major contribution to an understanding of key negative feelings of Asian migrant school practitioners in the WA State School system. I believe the uncovering of negative feelings would have a significant impact on stakeholders or policy-makers of the State School system. In sum, the research findings should instigate further debate and research leading to individual and public change initiatives for minimizing feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst Asian migrant school practitioners.

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 1 introduces the background leading to the research which includes the justification for teacher empowerment with special reference to Asian migrant school practitioners in line with the WA Charter of Multiculturalism. Based on an understanding of critical theory, the research problem and the research objectives were designed to guide the process of this research. Due to its emergent nature, a list of ‘emergent’ questions was outlined. Definitions of terms used in the research were also briefly explained. Key assumptions were made explicit. Chapter 1 sets out the outline and scene of the research.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the research process. It includes the origins of the research problem following an analysis of previous research conducted in the area of teacher empowerment; theoretical and conceptual foundations; the research methodology, including the quality standards and ethical issues that need to be considered in judging the efficacy of the research study.

Chapter 3 contains an autobiographical account of the ‘universal truths’ – my life principles, my origin as a boy from the Borneo jungle, my success stories and my Christian faith. Together these factors had shaped my beliefs, values and work ethic in my early days. These aspects of my life represent the component pieces of the picture of my lived experience.

Chapter 4 is a ‘thick description’ of my lived experience as an Asian School practitioner in three WA Government schools. The critical reflective account consists

Chapter 1 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

mainly of critical incidents I experienced and possible explanations for their occurrences.

Chapter 5 contains a record of responses from my three research participants about their lived experiences in response to my sharing of my experiences with them over the past four years. The record is mainly made up of the critical incidents they encountered as Asian migrant school practitioners in WA and their perception of the incidents.

Chapter 6 contains a discussion of my critical reflection on both my lived experiences and those of three other Asian migrant school practitioners (the research participants) from my cultural perspective as I tried to make sense of them. In doing so, I came to the realization that it was possibly a case of cultural dissonance between two contrasting cultures – seemingly a collectivist one of we Asian migrant teachers and an individualistic one of the local people. The dissonance was deemed to be the underlying cause of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst we Asian migrant practitioners.

Chapter 7 is an analysis of the source of cultural dissonance with reference to my lived experiences and those of my research participants. The analysis revealed that cultural attribution and subsequent presupposition appear to be the source of the dissonance. Critical reflection on the source was taken as a means of minimizing the dissonance. I believe that minimization of the dissonance has enabled us to emancipate ourselves from our ‘false world of existence’ thereby freeing ourselves from the feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as Asian migrant practitioners in WA Government schools.

Chapter 8 is a closing reflection on the whole research. It contains a summary of the research process, the findings and a discussion of the quality standards and implications of the research. This chapter also points out that this research is limited in its scope, but it conveys a message aimed at instigating primarily self-directed change in order to reduce the negative feelings of Asian migrant school practitioners. The aim is to help to empower them in their professional praxis, although its underlying political message directed at other stakeholders and policy-makers is also apparent.

CONCLUDING REMARK

This chapter has set the scene of the research. Cultural background, life principles and lived experiences are regarded as the subterranean factors that drive feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst we Asian migrant teachers. It is based on such a theoretical perspective that this research attempts to uncover the primary sources of the negative feelings. The self-directed critical reflection process has the ultimate aim of instigating more debate and research into the minimization of cultural dissonance between our collective culture and the seemingly individualistic culture of the teachers, parents and students we work with as a means of reducing our negative feelings and thereby empowering us to contribute more effectively towards educating the young of WA.

CHAPTER 2

Foundations Of The Research

OVERVIEW

This chapter is an overview of the theoretical and methodological background of this research. It begins with a discussion of the positivist paradigm and the interpretivist and critical paradigms to foreground the nature and the underlying epistemological assumptions of the research. Drawing on theorization of the interpretivist and critical paradigms, a conceptual paradigm was constructed to serve as a referent of my research methodology which has close reference to the interpretivist and critical paradigms. This chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the quality standards adopted, the research method and techniques used therein.

THE CONVENIENT PARADIGM

Www.dictionary.com defines a paradigm as a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for a community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline. The core element of the definition is the shared epistemology of 'reality' among the community members. There are as many ways of viewing reality as the number of social groups with differing epistemologies that govern their understanding of reality. The positivist epistemology appears to have dominated the way of viewing reality in the Western world for decades prior to the second half of the twentieth century.

The positivist epistemology has served the research world well for decades due to its underlying assumptions. I call this the 'convenient' paradigm because of its clinical dehumanization and decontextualization way of getting at the truth or reality. It appears to be a single-minded but persuasive way of producing knowledge. However, this 'way of seeing' reality has been criticized as formal, universalistic, reductionistic, intractable and one dimensional (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, Kincheloe, 2008, 1998).

Formalism is one of the key assumptions of the positivist epistemology. With its strict adherence to established methodologies, processes and techniques, the positivists seek 'truth' regardless of circumstances, time or contexts where 'truth' is to be gained. It is convenient for 'one size fits all'. The formalists' way of seeing is to see without / outside the context. To see how a fish swims is to examine it out of the water – one of the greatest fallacies of the formalists. The formalists find it convenient to get to reality in a decontextualized way – a phenomenon can be removed from its context of occurrence which it forms part of, to be examined in isolation and its meaning ascribed. While this approach is 'clinical' in terms of its methodology and procedure, and convenient, the meaning of the world of lived experiences generated out of the context would inevitably be incomplete and distorted.

Regarding dehumanization, the formalist assumes that human backgrounds, feelings or senses are outside their sphere of influence in any attempt at gaining an understanding of the world of lived experience. In this regard, human phenomena can be examined objectively as objects independent of human background, feelings or senses, as a natural science. While it is convenient and much more manageable in the study of human phenomena, the understanding generated would invariably be seriously lacking in integrity. It can be regarded as being 'out of touch' with 'real reality' – without embracing all aspects of reality.

To gain an understanding of lived experience in a world that is in a constant state of flux constantly evolving and changing, one would need to take into account the ever evolving circumstances and the people involved. In short, to gain an understanding of social phenomena involves two 'shifting grounds', that is, the knower and the known. The positivists, however, appear to rely on the intractable convenient 'truth' that the world is basically an inert and static entity. By adherence to established methodologies, they contend that one would be able to establish truth without taking into account the internal environments of the knower. Though the positivists might be able to get at some sort of truncated 'snapshot' truths, these truths remain partial. The fallacy of the positivist paradigm would become apparent when the snapshot truths are applied outside the 'snapshot' circumstances. Time, circumstances, and the environment of both the knower and the known are constantly evolving and changing.

Another fallible positivist assumption is the universalistic way of seeing and acting. The 'one size fits all' assumption asserts that "strictly following the correct epistemology and the research methods it supports applies to all domains of the world and the universe" (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, p. 6). The positivist epistemology is associated with the natural sciences. An apple will always fall to the ground when it drops from the tree. The positivists perceive human phenomena in terms of causal relationships between variables, and the truth generated out of the relationship is always a universal one (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Critical self-reflection of my 'universal truths' (see Chapter 3) appears to have located me within the positivist camp. It is a convenient way of seeing the truth which has been used by behaviorists and me in the justification of human actions, behaviour modification and manipulation. Kincheloe and Tobin (2009) suggest that the universalistic way of seeing has been used by Western colonial centres of power to ground their moral ethics to "dismiss and degrade the knowledge and well being of the marginalized and colonized groups" (p. 6). The power centres dictate what is 'real' just as the Church did in the past in different parts of the world. The Christian Fathers would not allow any person to express or perceive the shape of the earth in any other way except their way, that is, as flat despite the record in the book of Genesis. Any contradiction to the established 'truth' of the powerful would be labeled as heretical which was punishable by burning at the stake. Universalism is another example of the dehumanized and decontextualized way of seeing of the positivists.

It is often easier to understand a phenomenon if it can be measured within a value-free framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). With the exception of certain natural phenomena, not all phenomena lend themselves to measurement. Thus, if the understanding of a phenomenon is dependent on its measurability, then the ability to gain an understanding of the phenomenon would be very limited. There are multitudes of non-measurable contextual factors impacting on phenomena being studied. Ignoring contextual factors in the understanding of a phenomenon would seriously distort 'reality'. While it is straightforward and convenient to take the reductionistic approach to the understanding of a phenomenon, the approach would "provide a parochial,

limited, and more serious of all, deceptive body of knowledge” (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009).

Closely associated with universalism and formalism is the one dimensional assumption of the positivist epistemology “shaped by the belief that there is one true reality that can be discovered and completely described by following the correct research methods” (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, p. 7). The positivists contended that “there is a reality out there to be studied, captured, and understood” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9). The assumption has its root in the universalistic assumption of the powerful and the methodology of the formalist. While the powerful dictate ‘the correct research methods’, the formalists suggest that the way to the ‘truth’ is by following the set methodology and processes. Both of these groups of positivists appear to suggest: ‘follow what we say is the easiest and most convenient way to get to the truth’.

In sum, dehumanization and decontextualisation appear to be the two primary attributes of the positivist way of seeing the world. The separation of the knower and the known is their key to understanding the world of lived experience. The positivists may have a clinical and convenient way of seeing, but the truth generated is invariably either limited or distorted particularly when human elements are involved. “With their ethics, nomothetic commitments, are less concerned with the human details and deliberately unconcerned with rich descriptions associated with human elements because such detail interrupts the process of developing generalization” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10). The inadequacy and the fallacy of the positivist way of seeing may have led to the emergence of the humanist paradigms where human elements and context are integral to the way of seeing. The humanists assert that the knower and known are inseparable. They are the “Siamese twins connected at the point of perception” (Kincheloe 2002, p. 49).

THE HUMANIST PARADIGMS

The positivist paradigm served the research world well prior to the second half of the 20th Century. Since then, the dominance of this paradigm has increasingly been eroded by the rise of ‘feminism’ (see Lather, 1991), following which there has been a steady

emergence in the world of educational research of a stream of 'isms' including interpretivism and criticalism. This is the era of 'paradigm shifts'.

The Interpretivist-Constructivist Paradigm

Qualitative researchers can be regarded as interpreters of people's thoughts, beliefs, values and their associated social actions. However, their interpretive action is guided by "a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). In this way, researchers' beliefs about the ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (their relationship with the known) and the methodology (the way of going about finding out about the world or gaining knowledge of it) shape how they see the world and act in it. In short, they are bound within a web of epistemological and ontological premises that exert particular demands on them in their research. In the act of interpreting the other's meaning perspective, their social constructive epistemology would inevitably foreground their unfolding subjectivity in shaping the process of the inquiry (Taylor, Settelmaier & Luitel, 2009). In terms of quality standards of this research, trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2005) are priority concerns. In terms of methodological demand, interpretive researchers embrace "open-ended research design process that allows emergent research questions, emergent modes of inquiry and emergent reporting structure... so as theorizing which is also emergent as it occurs throughout the process" (Taylor, Settelmaier & Luitel, 2009).

The Critical Paradigm

The critical paradigm has its root in Habermas' (1970) argument for three types of interests which lead to the generation of three types of knowledge. At the centre of these three types of knowledge is the stance of "no knowledge without a knower" – an axiom and ontological foundation of the critical paradigm (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 48). The inseparable relationship of the knower and the known suggests that knowledge is

constructed by means of critical self-reflection by interpretive actions of a person who lived the experience. The unique human ability in seeing things in a holistic way can facilitate the construction of knowledge (Kincheloe, 2002, Gibson, 1986). Nevertheless, seeing things in holistic way is based on several premises:

- If knowledge is the prerequisite for social action, and if social action transforms knowledge, then knowledge cannot be conceived as static and certain. The contention represents the foundation of social construction.
- Social reality consists of two orders of construct. The first order involves knowledge of the world that a person derives from his or her interaction with the world as he or she forms and is part of the world history; lived experiences and understanding he or she derived from them that shape his or her behaviour. The second is that others are also ‘constructing’ the knower through their interpretation of the knower’s interaction with the social world (outsider constructs the insider).
- As a reflecting living human being, a knowing person forms part of the world history and is conscious of his or her constant interaction with the world. He or she is involved in all acts of understanding of the world and thus “all knowledge is a fusion of subject and object.
- The world he or she experiences is in a constant state of flux and evolving within a complex ‘web of reality’ and is not an objective entity but a constructed one which is organized and shaped by the people’s demographic characteristics (p. 48).

Apart from the ontological and epistemological premises, the critical paradigm is essentially a process of looking into the ‘self-consciousness’ of a particular group within a particular society. The fundamental aim is the engagement of the group members in a process of emancipation and enlightenment. “It is a process of emancipation from an initial state of bondage, delusion, and frustration to a final state of freedom, knowledge, and satisfaction.” (Geuss, 1981, p. 76). Due to its emancipating interest, the critical paradigm has an interventionist role aimed at addressing social injustice, growth and

advancement by exposing conditions of constraints and domination (Habermas, 1970). Nevertheless, Geuss (1981) argues that the paradigm is based on three primary assumptions: (1) transition from the present undesirable state of society, that is, at the initial stage of emancipation to the final desirable state is ‘objectively’ or ‘theoretically’ possible; (2) transition from the present state to the final state is necessary implying that the present state is unacceptable and undesirable, and the final state is characterized by lack of delusion, coercion and frustration; and (3) transition from the present state to the final desired state can come about only if the agents adopt the critical paradigm as their ‘self-consciousness’ and act on it (p. 76). In sum, the demand of the critical methodology is for the agents to engage themselves in a self-initiated process of inquiry into their ‘self-consciousness’ in transforming the present undesirable state by instigation changes in the agents’ world pictures and that of others around them. The change in world pictures is aimed at helping the agents to transform the social structures and practices in which the disadvantaged live and operate.

The Conceptual Paradigm

Reviewing the theorization of the positivists, I came to the conclusion that their epistemological stance appears to be that “the human perceiver occupies no space in the known world; operating outside of history, the knower knows the world of consciousness objectively” (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 48). This position seems to be similar to that of Cartesian dualism where human existence is said to consist of two separate realms, namely, an internal world of sensation and an objective world of natural phenomena, and the two are “forever separate and one could never be shown to be a form of the other” (p.49). The world of consciousness can be uncovered objectively and the systems operate apart from human perception, that is, no connection with the act of perceiving. However, after examining the humanist paradigm, I found for the first time that it was almost impossible to accept the positivist stance and Cartesian dualism. I came to realize that human thought cannot possibly be meaningfully separated from human feeling and action. I stand by the contention that knowledge is always constrained by the structure and functions of the mind and thus can only be known

indirectly. To separate the knower and the known is not only dehumanizing but also decontextualising – seeking to alienate the knower from the known. In addition, the act also can be ‘inhumane’ as they seek to ‘work’ the forces of nature to frustrate human creativity, and thus the creation of an artificial environment. This action appears to be typical of the behaviorists in the field of social science where they ‘milk’ the ‘working’ of the positivist ideal for their purpose of behaviour manipulation or modification within the social system they operate in or among the people under their influence or control according to their whims and wishes, often at the expense of social justice, creativity and good work. The one-dimensionalism of Western colonialists and Eastern imperialists has thrived and prospered on such dubious moral ethics.

Realizing the fallacy and inadequacy of the positivist paradigm for gaining an understanding of the world of lived experience of an individual led me to explore the interpretivist and the critical paradigms, to search for a possible epistemological framework to scaffold my research into the world of lived experience of myself and that of three other Asian migrant practitioners in WA. In Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) terms, this is the seventh moment of qualitative research. This is the moment of “critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom and community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). This is also the moment when I ‘found’ my place and became established in the world in a number of ways, in particular, in relation to my educational research philosophy.

The journey of grounding myself within the seventh moment of qualitative research paradigm has been unsettling for a person who has been very contented and firmly established in the positivist mindset. The realization of the fallacy and inadequacy of the positivist paradigm, made explicit by Kincheloe and Tobin (2009), necessitated the need to find an alternative paradigm. That was when I found Taylor’s (2008) suggestion of a hybrid paradigm to be intellectually stimulating and inviting. He suggests that researchers can draw on “alternative research paradigms to design hybrid research methodologies... as an endpoint of well informed decision-making without ignoring the issue of availability of appropriate resources.” (p. 886). The suggestion propelled me to embark on a ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) process in the construction of a

conceptual paradigm to inform and guide my research drawing upon whatever human capital I have.

Founded on the interpretivist and critical paradigms, my conceptual paradigm is invariably aligned with the theorization of the two parent paradigms (see Figure 1). This hybrid conceptual paradigm, however, does not serve as a conceptual framework with its restrictive demand on this research, but rather as a referent to guide the unfolding understanding of issues of social justice among Asian migrant school practitioners in WA.

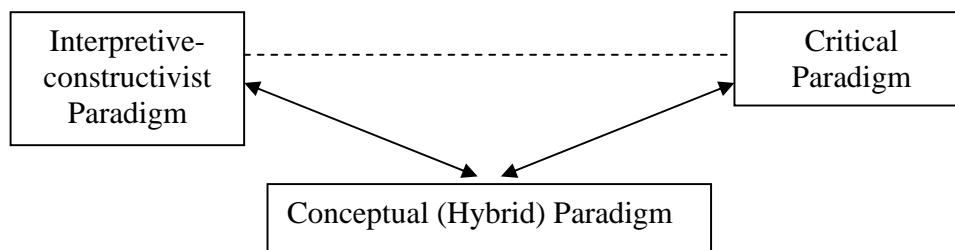


Figure 1: *The conceptual paradigm*

In accordance with the definition of a paradigm described earlier, the conceptual paradigm is a way of finding out about social and personal reality – a methodology used to understand *reality*. Since it was born out of the interpretivist-constructivist and critical paradigms, this research bears the hallmark of their attributes, that is, the interpretivist-constructivist and critical construction of the lived experiences of Asian migrant school practitioners in WA.

The conceptual paradigm assumes that the lived experiences of Asian migrant teachers were constructed by those who lived the experience, thus reflecting the constructive paradigm. Due to its intricate connection with culture and background, reality is assumed to be constructed both out of their personal as well as their social constructions as a social group. To generate an understanding of these constructions, one would have to interpret the subjectivity of their lived experiences within the context of its occurrence – a characteristic of the interpretive paradigm. In the context of my

lived experience as an Asian migrant school practitioner I held a belief that there was a disempowering experience. This belief could well be common amongst other Asian migrant teachers. Thus a critical examination of the “key sources of the feelings of disempowerment within the structures of society and the habitual behaviour of ‘encultured’ individuals (via critical self-reflectivity)” constituted the priority task of this research (Taylor, 2008, p. 887) – a task which is clearly indicative of the critical paradigm. Within the critical paradigm, analysis via critical reflectivity involves researchers being “*suspicious of all grand narratives*” (Taylor, 2008, p. 888). The long held and established beliefs and assumptions that determine the norms and practices of a social group are often considered as cultural myths. In order to emancipate migrant teachers within the context of their lived experiences, disempowering cultural myths need to be deconstructed through critical self-reflection. A multi-paradigmatic approach adopted by this research has been essential as each of the paradigms appears to be able to represent part of the whole attempt in gaining a more complete picture of social reality.

Following the construction of the conceptual (hybrid) paradigm as a referent, the scene was set for me to look into the issue of empowerment or, more precisely, feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst four (including myself) Asian migrant school practitioners in WA to understand how power imbalances serve as key sources of the negative feelings with normative social structures, especially how they give rise to and reproduce habitual behaviours of the Asian migrant school practitioners in West Australian schools (Taylor, Settelaar & Luitel, 2009). The understanding of power imbalances, however, did not begin with the social environment in which I operated but with me, that is, my own cultural background, life principles and upbringing which are assumed to have shaped my lived experiences and professional praxis. In addition, this research was not only about interpretive understanding of the issue of social injustice among the migrant teachers, but was an intervention seeking to address and ultimately transform the state of social injustice within the State education system. By means of narrative logic, narrative and non-linguistic genres such as photographs, I engaged other Asian migrant practitioners and readers in reflecting critically on their own complicity in reproducing normative social values and practices, in what is called ‘pedagogical

thoughtfulness' (Taylor, Settelmaier & Luitel, 2009). In this way, I had facilitated the foregrounding and visualization of our shared cultural world. Our world had been deconstructed and turned into a series of representations in the forms of field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos. This is an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world with the ultimate aim of transforming the world. In short, this was a qualitative research inquiry characterized by locating myself in a natural setting in my attempt both to make sense of my lived experience through self reflection and to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Methodology

The location of my research within the naturalistic paradigm implies sensitivity in the choice of whatever context specific materials, such as personal experiences, critical moments, artifacts and stories, and the use of multiple and interconnected interpretive methods or practices in order to make the world visible (Becker, 1998). The task required me to assume the role of a *bricoleur* or a quilt maker. I think Levi-Strauss (1966: quoted in Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p.4) has the best definition of a *bricoleur*, that is, "Jack of all trades or a kind of DIY person." My primary objective as a *bricoleur* was to piece together a set of representations fitted to the specifics of a complex situation called a *bricolage*. The 'Jack of All Trades' using all his trade skills, tools, experiences, methods and techniques available to him to piece together a set of representations in order to address a problem or to create a solution. My role as a *bricoleur* in the construction of a *bricolage* implies: (1) piecing together a set of representations as a process; (2) drawing on different available experiences and skills; and (3) it is an emergent task.

Autoethnography

To embark on a process of piecing together a set of representations to make my world visible with reference to the conceptual paradigm constituted of interpretivism and criticalism (in terms of their ontological and epistemological theorizing), I chose autoethnography as the research methodology. Autoethnography has been used in a variety of disciplines, but it is its defining feature that has prompted the choice of the method for this research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). It entails that I perform narrative analysis pertaining to myself as intimately related to the phenomenon of the empowerment of Asian migrant school practitioners in WA. It is concerned with writing about myself as a school practitioner-researcher by drawing upon all my experiences and skills. It is a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice which constitutes my research philosophy (McIllveen, 2008, p. 3).

The term ‘autoethnography’ originates from three Greek words of *αὐτο* ‘him/one’, *ἔθνος*, ‘race, people and culture’ as a unified concept, and *γραφο*, ‘a written account’. It is an account written by one about himself or herself in relation to his or her race, people and culture. Most writers would have translated the term, *ἔθνος*, as ‘people’. But my knowledge of Greek language has alerted me to the translation of the term to mean ‘race, people and culture’ as the complete meaning of the term which constitutes the core objective of autoethnography both as a research and a research methodology (Reed-Danahay, 2002, 1997). Autoethnography is not simply about a particular person but more completely is about his or her race, place among his or her people, and culture. It is an analytical personal account about oneself as part of a social group with shared culture in relation to an external environment which is often different from the one in which the reader lives. Autoethnography is also a personal account by which the writer wants to inform the ‘outsider’ audience of an alternative perspective which is very different from their own. In short, it is usually an explanation of oneself to another in a way that I call ‘political outreach’ – a description and explanation with an implicit political agenda.

Autoethnography has its origin in both ethnography and autobiography. Classical ethnography is an interpretive and analytical account of a people or a group in that the knower is separate from the known – the outsider is analyzing, interpreting and writing about the ‘insider’ through participant observation. It can be a positivist exercise concerned primarily with objectivity – the world is there to be discovered together with its concern for legitimacy and validity. However, the realist conventions and objective observer position of the standard ethnography have been called into question in the late Twentieth Century (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This led to the paradigm shift to place the relationship between the knower and the known at the centre of the knowledge creation and thus move beyond the positivist ideal of finding facts to providing evidence and interpreting the interpretations made. Similarly in the case of autobiography, the notion of a coherent, individual self has been called into question as well. It is no longer a personal narrative, single event or experience written to the self as the primary audience as a straight forward description of oneself (Reed-Danahay, 1997). The paradigm shift brought upon by postmodernism has broken down the constraints in both ethnography and autobiography and moved the disciplines into an emergent field of autoethnographic research. It is a synthesis of both postmodern ethnography and autobiography.

Quality Standards

The departure from the traditional disciplines does not mean that anything goes but the knower still needs to make explicit his or her relationship with the known, and to be concerned about the ‘hero status’ of the writer, ascertaining who are we writing about/for, and what are we writing about - the five ‘whs’ of writing (see Settelmaier, 2003). Apart from the content, the writing needs to be recognized as having rigor and integrity in terms of its presentation.

To satisfy these requirements, quality guidelines suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were used both as quality assurance for this research and also a directional guide in the generation of information. Although this research is a departure from traditional disciplines, the standards used in judging the quality of this research are parallel to the traditional criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1989) termed these as “parallel or foundational

criteria as they are intended to parallel the rigor criteria that have been used within the conventional paradigm for many years” (p. 233). Parallel to the four quality criteria of the conventional paradigm of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, respectively. These four criteria for judging quality are concerned with the ‘abilities’ of the research.

The first of these abilities for this research is its ability to be regarded as a credible piece of research with its process and content believable. Several research tasks were undertaken to ensure its credibility. The first was prolonged engagement which began prior to the writing of the research proposal because one would be unwise to write a research proposal without prior consideration of the long process involved ahead (four more years in my case). The process began with the building of relationship between me and different contributing parties to the research. In most qualitative research, the building of relationship usually begins with the research participants, but in my research the building of relationship began with my family members, relatives and all other people who were either the informants or the sources of information related to my lived experience. My youngest auntie (my father’s youngest sister), for example, was one of the most important contributors and authenticators of information about my ‘heroic’ past as a young child, the social environment at the time (four to five decades ago) and the universal truths concerning education explained in the next chapter.

Apart from the gathering of information other than that which I could recall and authenticating information gathered, prolonged engagement with my information sources also involved the gathering of artifacts, memorabilia and pictures to authenticate and enrich the writing of my lived experience, particularly for the period of the 1950’s to 1980’s. Several visits were made to my home town and surrounding villages both to speak to the locals about the past and to jolt my memories of lived experience. It was sad that I was no longer able to return to my home village to refresh my memories of my lived experience as the whole village, including the surrounding ones, once thriving communities of hundreds of families have been over-run and reclaimed by the tropical forests!

Prolonged engagement also involved establishing relationships with my fellow Asian migrant school practitioners and three research participants. Ever since the

conception of this research, informal discussions were carried out intermittently about their lived experience, particularly their feelings as Asian migrant school practitioners and their attributions of the feelings. Without the prolonged engagement with them, good rapport and trust would not have been established. This is evident as all the research participants were very wary of giving away information about their school experiences as I found out that they were fearful of possible repercussions of ‘speaking out’. Thus, a lot of effort was expended over a period of four years to convince, assure and re-assure them that they would not be identified in any way by their employing schools, in particular, and the Education Department, in general. In the effort to protect their identities, intermittent discussions were held with my supervisors to identify the parts of this research report that might reveal their identities. The offending text such as those making reference to a school’s natural environment, for example, was replaced with a fictitious account.

Closely associated with prolonged engagement is persistent observation. There was a range of issues or topics I could have investigated and written about myself and my research participants. However, the focus of my attention was on issues or incidents that evoked feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy in our professional practices and the attributive reasons for the feelings. These are the central issues that I investigated. It was intended to “add depth to the scope which prolonged engagement affords.” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, 237). Apart from a measure of quality, persistent observation with definite foci on feelings and their attributive reasons served to prevent the divergence of this research.

Member checks were used to ensure the quality of this research. It is a “process of testing hypotheses, data, preliminary categories, and interpretations with members of the stake-holding groups from whom the original constructions were collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). In this research, there were two stake-holding groups from two different research fields. The first was the distant home town and village people, including my older generation relatives, older siblings and other people who still have recollections of the village life in the past. Member checks, or more accurately authenticity checks in this case, were attempted as a check on the authenticity of the experiences I recounted

and described or constructions I made about my childhood. These checks were costly¹ but were deemed necessary so that accurate constructions could be made. The focus of the checks was on the time and place of occurrence of events and incidences, and the people involved. The need for authenticity checks was deemed imperative as these details are fundamental to my life stories. The second group of stakeholder checks was the research participants. The member checks in this case occurred continuously and concurrently while information was gathered and constructions made. The research participants were either asked directly to confirm any statement or construction made or they were asked in different ways to verify the authenticity of the statement or construction made. The final member checks were carried out when the write-up based on their responses was presented to them for verification. They were requested to make amendments to the responses or constructions made by them if they identified any discrepancy between what they provided and what had been described.

Transferability is another criterion for judging quality of this research. The mentioning of the term ‘transferability’ conjures an image of generalisability as in the case of the positivist paradigm. But in this case, “transferability is always relative and depends entirely on the degree to which salient conditions overlap or match.” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 241). However, there are multiple realities, such as change of the nature of the enquiry and time factors that often work to frustrate the matching of salient conditions and thus making the transferability of one context to another almost impossible. Nevertheless, the transferability of this research can be addressed by what Clifford Geertz (1973) called ‘thick description’. This is “a process of providing an extensive and careful description of the time, the place, the context, and overall the culture in which those constructions were found to be salient” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 242). By following the process, I believe, similar study can be conducted by anyone within his or her own context or in a context he or she has an interest in. In fact, one of the research participants has expressed a keen interest in following the process to conduct a similar research in her school context.

Dependability is another measure of quality. Conventionally, dependability is concerned with stability of data over time. In the case of qualitative research, or more

¹ Making multiple trips to my home town and village in Borneo

specifically, this inquiry, stability of data over time would have been a major weakness as the research changed and shifted over time as new constructions came into being as new information became available. The hallmark of such a research is that it is constantly changing and emerging over time. It can be related to the researcher's "progressive subjectivity" which is one of the credibility quality standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 238). Despite the apparent impossibility, the research still needs to be judged as dependable and this was afforded by a dependability audit. The detailed recording of the process and the information used in the research, the process and sources of information or constructions are trackable and publicly inspectable within the boundary of the required ethical standards that this research is bounded to.

Confirmability in qualitative research is parallel to the conventional criterion of objectivity. The primary difference between the two quality standards is that while the former is concerned with assurances of quality in the method, the latter is concerned with the data. However, they are similar in terms of their primary objective which makes part of this quality standard inappropriate for judging the quality of this research. The similarity lies with their common objective of assuring that the outcomes of inquiries are divorced from the values, motives, biases, or political persuasions of the inquirer as in the case of objectivity, and the data, interpretations, and outcomes of inquiries are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the inquirer and are not simply figments of the imagination of the inquirer in the case of confirmability. The problem of adopting this measure of quality arises when the inquirer is the object of the inquiry itself. The findings of an autoethnographic inquiry are neither divorced from the values, motives, biases, or political persuasions of the autoethnographer nor rooted solely in the contexts and persons other than the researcher, and they are constituted by the interpretation and imagination of the researcher himself or herself. Despite this apparent shortcoming, the confirmability quality standard is applicable as its criterion demands that "data gathered can be tracked to their sources, and the logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit in the narrative by using a confirmability audit similar to the dependability audit described earlier." (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 243).

While these parallel criteria are useful, “they are not entirely satisfying due to their positivist roots and origins although adjustments have been made for the different assumptions of the naturalist paradigm” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 245). These writers argue that the criteria speak to methods which are the primacy of the positivist paradigm. To rely on these criteria would

leave an inquiry vulnerable to questions regarding whether stakeholder’s rights were in fact honoured... prolonged engagement and persistent observation (or other methods one might choose) do not ensure that stakeholder constructions have been collected and faithfully represented, and complete reliance on methods alone would be insufficient to guarantee that the intent of the inquiry effort was achieved... Outcome, product, and negotiation criteria are equally important in judging a given inquiry” (p. 245).

In addressing the insufficiency of the parallel criteria, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest the authenticity criteria. These include fairness – the extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structures are solicited and honoured with an inquiry. This is achieved in two ways: (1) Identifying all potential stakeholders and seeking out their constructions, claims, concerns, and issues. (2) An open negotiation of recommendation and of the agenda for subsequent action – a transparent and fair process of prioritizing unresolved claims, concerns, and issues, collecting information relevant to them. Other authenticity criteria include ontological authenticity, that is, the provision of vicarious experience to allow stakeholders and others to apprehend their own ‘worlds’ in more informed and sophisticated ways, and this has to be indicated in their testimonies. In addition, their individual constructions have to be entered in the audit trail at different points of time in the inquiry process for the purpose of documenting ‘progressive subjectivity’. Catalyst authenticity is defined as the extent to which action is stimulated and facilitated by the inquiry process. The extent to which stakeholders are empowered to act is referred to as tactical authenticity. In both cases, post-inquiry follow-ups and testimonies are conditions for judging these two authenticity criteria. Thus plans and

procedures for soliciting post-inquiry and testimonies are essential part of judging catalyst and tactical authenticity criteria.

Research Tasks

Following the establishment of the theoretical and methodological foundations, the scene has been set for the research. This is now followed by a series of research tasks to be executed. This research is a detailed “interrogation of talk, text, and interaction” (Silverman, 2001, cited in Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 18), and thus I embraced a multiplicity of techniques as a *bricoleur* to piece together a set of representations in an attempt to make sense of lived experience. Primary strategies include reflexive autobiographical writing and sharing of my stories and lived experience with other Asian migrant school practitioners in WA through semi-structured interviews as suggested by Bryman (2001). Informal discussions through emails and contacts, analysis of participants’ narratives were also used in the interactive co-generation of conclusions about our lived experience as Asian migrant school practitioners. However, before the research process could commence, a series of administrative tasks needed to be completed.

Administrative tasks

As this research involved ‘human subjects’ (not that it was to involve clinical intervention of the research participants), I needed to obtain a Level C ethics clearance from Curtin University Ethics Committee. After much effort and editing of the application form, the application for clearance was finally approved following satisfaction of the set requirements in August 2007 including description of the specific number of participants to be used, the type of participants to be allowed, and specific wording on the letter of invitation to participants and research sites to be used (see Appendix A).

As this research was highly context specific and involved use of research sites where the participants operated, that is, various schools in Western Australia, additional clearance needed to be sought from the Department of Education of WA. The research was sanctioned and ‘blessed’ by the Department in August 2007’, followed by a request of the Department to provide a copy of the research report when it is completed (see Appendix B). The request could signal the start of my ‘political outreach’ to inform and transform the school system about equity among Asian migrant school practitioners. Thus I assume that our co-generated recommendations have an impact on future policy decisions related to Asian migrant school practitioners in WA.

Following the letter of consent from the Education Department, armed with the Information Sheet about the research and the Letter of Invitation to Participants in the Research, arrangements were made to enter the research sites and visit the participants officially through the respective school principals towards the end of 2007. The first visit was used to brief the school principals about the nature of the research and what was expected of the schools as research sites. A second visit was arranged to meet the research participants in the research site in my official capacity as a Department sanctioned researcher. But the visit was relatively informal and it was a gentle introduction into the research process as the research process would require at least another two to three years of contact and interaction with them. Despite it being an informal meeting, information about their background teaching experiences, their family background and their overall feelings about teaching in this country were recorded and later analyzed as part of the research data. It was during the second visit that the research participants were briefed on the nature and expectations of the research in terms of their input, such as time commitment. They were given a formal letter of invitation and a reply to confirm their participation in the research. The participants were certified migrant teachers, by WA standards, who had come from the Southeast Asian region and who were teaching in WA schools. This research involved three participants and they were selected by purposive sampling – that is, selection was governed by emerging insights relevant to the phenomena being investigated, similar to a grounded case study. Essentially, it was “a purposive attempt to seek both the typical and divergent data to maximize the range of information obtained about the empowerment without

suppressing deviant cases” (see Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 148). Detailed description of these participants is provided in Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

Another important administrative task to be completed prior to the research proper was ethical approval. In accordance with Curtin University of Technology Principles of Conduct from the NHMRC, the participants were informed in writing and invited to participate in the study (see Appendices C and D). No identifying names or addresses have been used in this thesis. A pseudonym has been used for each participant’s identity. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reasons. None did so over the course of this research. All information gathered was kept strictly confidential and each participant had access to their own interview transcripts on request. Information from participants was kept in a locked cabinet in my office. Permission from each of the informants was sought prior to audio-taping the interviews. Invasive techniques or payments were not used. Data gathered will be kept for five years after the completion of this research and then destroyed.

Reflective biographical writing

In the words of Laurel Richardson (2000), writing is “a way of knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it.” (p. 516). Recalling the experience of the research process over the past two years, Richardson’s (2000) proposition of writing as a way of knowing has indeed been a characterising experience where writing could be regarded as a ‘revealing’ exercise of my deep seated feelings about my lived experience as a school practitioner. The most challenging part of the writing experience through the course of

the research would have to be where to begin. It was a huge struggle in the initial process of my writing experience until one of the graduate seminar presenters shared his experience of what and where to begin writing. His advice was “write anything, from anywhere, just don’t stop writing!” Considering his academic standing in Curtin University at the time, I had a feeling that his way might be just what I needed. Indeed it was his experience of ‘writing anything’ that was the catalyst which spurred me into writing. The ‘just write anything’ and encouragement and positive attitude of both of my supervisors led me from one aspect of writing to another.

As my research is concerned about critical self reflection of my lived experience as a school practitioner, I began writing about my background especially how it might have some connection with my current feelings and perceptions of equity amongst Asian migrant school practitioners in WA. When convinced of the idea to ‘just begin writing from anywhere and about anything’, I felt a sense of being let out of ‘literary confinement’ and enjoyed a confidence boosting feeling of freedom of expression. From then on, the writing process took off without much difficulty. At this junction, credit has to be recorded to both of my supervisors for urging me on with positive and encouraging feedback in the writing process. Nevertheless, the transition from the positivist third person voice, ‘the researcher, he, his and him’ was unbelievably uncomfortable. The positivist terms constantly crept back into the text and several attempts had to be made to exclude my positivist past and take on the humanistic present voice of using the first person, ‘I’, me and myself.

The reflective biographical writing commenced with narrative accounts of my cultural beliefs which were socially constructed and strongly reinforced by my life principles, my parents, extended family members and relatives. These beliefs are deeply entrenched in the ‘universal truths’ about education, and are described in detail in Chapter 3. This was followed by narratives of my lived experience as a prominent member of my family, my parents, in particular my mother whom I labelled as the matriarch of the family, my educational background, my success stories and my Christian faith. In Chapter 4, the reflective writing progressed to the writing of critical moments of my life in this country and incidents as a school practitioner in WA schools.

The writing was aimed at piecing together the set of circumstances in order to make sense of my feelings of inequity and disempowerment as a school practitioner.

Sharing of my biographical writings

Instead of conducting interviews of my research participants, as is typical in interpretivist-constructivist research in order to construct a version of lived experience within the context of the experience with the participants (Pole & Morrison, 2003), I decided to start a conversation by sharing my lived experience with my three research participants, whom I considered as colleagues. This would be a more ‘insider’ way of getting at their beliefs, backgrounds and lived experience as school practitioners in WA. The sharing of beliefs, background and experiences embraced a mixture of emotionalism and constructivism. The former perceives my informants as experiencing subjects who were actively constructing their social worlds and the latter emphasizes joint-construction of meanings of lived experience as Asian migrant school practitioners. Instead of formal interviews, informal discussions, emails, and telephone contacts were the primary means of communication in the process of sharing beliefs, information regarding our cultural backgrounds and school experiences. The sharing was aimed at seeking consonance with my participants regarding their cultural backgrounds, especially in relation to their school experience and their feelings about their professional practice as Asian migrant teachers. Any dissonance was also recorded for comparison in relation to personal background and experience, and possible reasons ascribed. The ultimate aim of the sharing of our backgrounds and lived experiences was the co-generation of our feelings about the issue of equity in WA society, in general, and in the education system in particular, and how the equity issue of the wider society impacts on the school system in WA.

Narrative Analysis

This research solicited several narratives and they were used to gauge the participants' beliefs and interpretations that guided perception, thought, interaction and action patterns upon which social relations, interpretations of the past and plans for the future were organised (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Similar to the gathering of documents for analysis, soliciting of narratives was guided by the research objectives which encompassed two dimensions of empowerment operating in the two dimensions of participants' school life. The solicited narratives were used as an additional source of background information that I, as the researcher, amassed for classification. The narratives were also used as "a discussion point for subsequent sharing sessions to solicit stories from the informants" (Minicheillo et al., 1995, p. 86). They also were used to provide 'ethnographic context' of the informants and as materials for analysis and probing – a less intrusive way of obtaining the informants' original account and interpretation of their own life (Minicheillo et al., 1995).

In this research, data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collecting - an interactive process between the researcher and the participants. The task involved "taking constructions gathered from the context and reconstructing them into meaningful wholes" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 333). The process consisted of sorting and categorising bits of field data gathered from sharing our backgrounds, experiences and lived experiences through narrative analysis to piece together a set of representations in order to build a picture, to tell a 'story', about our lived experiences as Asian migrant school practitioners in WA.

SUMMARY

A brief analysis of the epistemological theorization of the positivist paradigm identified its inadequacy for this research. A combination of paradigms, in particular the critical and interpretivist-constructionist paradigms, appeared to best cater for this inquiry into

the issue of equity among the Asian migrant school practitioners. The consideration led to the construction of a conceptual paradigm to act as a methodological referent for the research. The conceptual paradigm embraces the critical and the interpretivist paradigms and thus this research reflects their intrinsic characteristics of co-generating understanding of the lived experiences of the migrant teachers as an attempt at instigating debate aiming ultimately at transformation of disempowering and inefficacious feelings amongst Asian migrant practitioners.

The research involved the adoption of critical autoethnography as its main methodology with an emphasis on ‘self-consciousness’ with an emancipatory interest and an interventional role I called a political outreach to my fellow Asian migrant school practitioners and other stakeholders of the system. This research serves (i) to inform about the lived experiences of migrant practitioners, and (ii) to invite readers on board to feel our feelings of being Asian migrant teachers – a political maneuvering to instigate debate and ultimately transformation of normative social realities.

Among the research tasks completed were my autobiographical writing, sharing of the writing with my fellow migrant teachers, and co-telling of our lived experiences as a unified political force aiming at transforming the disempowering feelings of Asian migrant teachers. Other research tasks described include sampling, analysis of the narratives, quality and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3

Reliving The Past: The Boy From Borneo Jungle

OVERVIEW

This chapter contains a set of representations that I pieced together in order to make my world visible. I began by a ‘thick description’ of my past beginning with my entrenched belief in the universal truths. This was followed by a description of my origin, my success stories and my Christian faith. I believe that, taken together, they constitute the component pieces of the quilt that I, as quilt maker or *bricoleur*, strived to put together to actualize my world of existence. The process was used as the foundation for critical self-reflection with the primary aim of uncovering the source of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA Government schools.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most emotion-evoking pieces of writings I have encountered would have to be Caroline Ellis’ (1993) narrative of the sudden death of her younger brother. I read the narrative almost in one breath. It captivated me! Indeed I could not comprehend the amount of emotion of grief that could be generated out of the reading of a piece of literary material. I consider the narrative not simply a piece of literary material but a narrative with a real person with real and raw emotion behind it. The emotion-evoking experience was a reliving of my past following the passing of my youngest brother in 1996. The reading had indeed evoked an enormous amount of consonance of feeling between me and Caroline even though I have never seen or met her. Although my lived experience as an Asian migrant school practitioner may not be as dramatic and emotionally evoking, I believe that my feeling as a migrant school practitioner in this

country would have a lot of emotional consonance with other Asian migrant teachers and thus be emotionally evoking.

Narrative of self is a form of evocative writing which is a highly personalized, revealing text in which a writer tells stories about his or her own lived experience. “Using dramatic recall, images, characters and narratives, he or she pieces together a set of representations of a ‘plot’ to ask the reader to relive the events emotionally with the writer” (Richardson, 2000, p. 521). I begin my story by recounting my experience of living in the shadow of assumed universal truths entrenched in my family culture.

THE UNIVERSAL TRUTHS

“It’s universal!” “It’s unchallengeable!” are the two constant reminders that were reinforced in my extended household of three generations in the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. Relatives and visitors or in fact everyone I knew of or was in contact with were parroting the same assertions ever since the day I could make any sense of anything anybody said:

- No pain no gain.
- Education is the way!
- Education is the highest order profession.
- Education is ‘listening’.

I call these assertions of our family the ‘universal truths’ although these may have their origins with the ancient Chinese ideologies or philosophies, in particular about the priority order of education. Those who are engaged in the ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ debate in the past and present would have no hesitation in denouncing the universal truth of ‘no pain no gain’, although few would reject it outright. Hard work is the way to success regardless of environment or intelligence was the call of the day and every day of my childhood. By the time I reached primary school age, my parents, in particular my mother, began a new era of indoctrination of the universal truth, in her words, “to grow up to become a real man”. The indoctrination was a combination of, I would describe

as, brainwashing backed up with physical intimidation and subtle persuasion. These were not too dissimilar to what Hitler did to his followers or Stalin did to his comrades in arms in the USSR. The former consisted of citing examples of the socially undesirable and thus their miseries. Their lowly and miserable existence in society was attributed to their laziness and inactivity while they were young. The gist of their assertion was that there were neither any legitimate circumstances nor reasons for their lowly existence. The brain washing used an array of techniques including relating the success stories of local identities – their visible assets and social standing - attributing all their success to the universal truths regardless. I was indeed indoctrinated to emulate the social elite by the way of the universal truths. Promise of reward was another common technique.

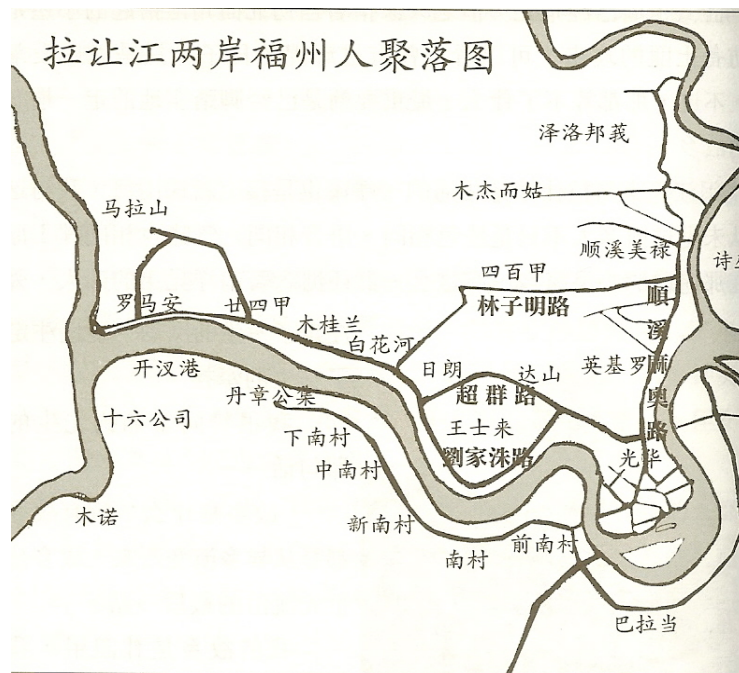


Figure 2: Sketch map of villages along Rejang River on Borneo Island (Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Annual Conference Board of Literature)

Under such dictatorial regime, any sign of rejection of the indoctrination was put down by threat of removal of privileges or a proper dressing down with words that would be

deemed to be unthinkable in this modern age. In addition, curses for not following her instruction and advice were not uncommon and this was often backed up by on the spot physical punishment – a twisting pinch on the ears being the most common.

My home village bears the name of 十六公司¹ (A) and my reward holiday destination village of my maternal grandmother is called ‘中南村’(B) which translates literally as ‘middle south village’. Both of these villages are located down stream of the main town called ‘詩巫’ (C) Sibü.

‘If only I had a good education’ was often another common argument of living below the poverty line in the village. My parents genuinely believed that if they had had a reasonable formal education our family would be in a much better position in terms of meeting the basic needs of the family, providing for us and our overall social standing. Their education was disrupted by Japanese occupation of my country in the first half of the 1940’s. The missed educational opportunity was their constant reminder to me, “If only we had a good education. We can... We can... and we will able to...” – ringing loud all day every day in our ears. “We did not have the opportunity. You have all the chance to do it... Do it for yourself, for us and the whole family so that we could leave this world in peace” were the constant reminders throughout my primary school days.

The indoctrination usually continued with the citing of ancient Chinese teaching of thousands of years ago. To have a profession associated with a formal educational qualification is considered to be the best among the four socially recognized professions. The universal truths, I believe, originated from the glamour of officialdom of the Imperial Court of ancient China – the educated class. They were the cream, the rich and the prosperous and thus the envy of society. The educated were rated most favourably in society in terms of their prestige as compared to the three other classes, that is, the farmers, the tradesmen, and the businessmen being the least respectable or prestigious profession. The assumed prestige of a profession associated with formal education was

¹ The name which is in four Mandarin characters refers literally to a company of sixteen. They were sixteen migrants from Fu Cheng Province of China. Following their arrival at the site in the early 1900’s, they cleared the virgin jungle and established their homesteads with rubber gardens under the encouragement of the British Colonial Government represented by Rajah Brooke. The title ‘Rajah’ in local language refers to king. The village has since been over-run and reclaimed by the jungle and was no longer in existence since the 1990’s. The demise of the village was attributed to the rise of communist insurgency in the area that caused the exodus of villagers which began in the 1970’s.

promoted, nurtured and actively encouraged to ensure the security of not only my future, but the financial security, honour, and respect of the whole extended family in village.

As far as my education is concerned, my parents had the view that to be educated is to be a willing vessel to be filled with knowledge or, more accurately, whatever knowledge however alien and irrelevant to me by the school masters. When I began to question the usefulness or benefits of the knowledge being filled into my brain, heart and spirit, my parents would always remind me that ‘it might come in handy one day’ citing a typical Chinese idiom, ‘書到用時方恨少’ which translates as ‘one would hate himself or herself when he or she begins to realize he or she is short when it comes to the use of education’. To be educated in my case meant total submission to and acceptance of the teaching or transfer of knowledge from the school masters to me. To be educated was to listen with total submission and obedience as depicted in the Mandarin character illustrated in Figure 3 below:

The image shows the large, bold Mandarin character '聽' (tīng), which means 'to listen'. The character is composed of the radical '耳' (ear) on the left and the radical '聿' (brush) on the right, with a '心' (heart) radical at the bottom right.

Figure 3: Mandarin character ‘Listen’

Being an Asian migrant school practitioner of Chinese origin, the cultured concept of listening for a student or the way students are expected to listen is illustrated in the Mandarin character figure above. Superficially, listening could refer to hearing but more deeply it refers to being obedient. In this regard, it refers to being obedient in taking in whatever is being imparted by the school masters. In short, teachers are the agents of knowledge and the students are the empty vessels who need to be filled with

the knowledge. As listening denotes obedience, so listening is not selective. In practical terms, the students are required or expected to fulfill the criteria of listening as depicted in the composite Mandarin character in the figure above. These include:

1. the use of the ears (耳); and
2. they have to be the king (王) with
3. ten out of ten focus or attention (十),
4. in full vision (目); with
5. one or single (一)
6. heart (心).

In sum, to be educated is to listen with ears, a totally focused mind, single hearted and with obedience. Ironically, education in Mandarin is learning and asking (學 Learn; 問 Ask) implying that there may be room for disagreement with the transferor of knowledge, that is, the master/teacher. However, it is likely that asking means to seek additional or clarification of the knowledge that is being transferred.

To be educated is to be a willing vessel of knowledge infusion is not only considered as a universal truth in the contemporary Malaysian society of the time in Borneo, but it was also a deeply held belief of my parents. The truth was strictly upheld by them as was evident in their total support of the school teachers in the village where their words were practically law. Questioning of teachers' authority and infringement of school rules would be considered as the crimes of the day and would attract serious penalty at school and at home often in the form of corporal punishment, extreme threat, deprivation of liberty and curtailment of whatever privileges a child might have. Thus, like most of my contemporaries, one of my greatest fears during primary school years would have to be the communication between the school and my parents. May be the slightest hint of impropriety from the school would attract immediate punishment at home.

Indoctrination and enforcement of the universal truths was unceasing throughout the formative years of my childhood. As time passed, the truths became deeply rooted

in my beliefs, values and practices. In short, I have been squarely encultured in the universal truths which have formed the bedrock of my attitude and belief in education. Although education in this contemporary world can come in various shapes and forms, almost all professions, including various trades, still require formal paper qualifications as the yardstick of one's performance ability.

GENDER BIAS

Apart from the four universal truths that drive my education and work ethic, indoctrination of cultural values is not less intense among members of Asian society. Gender bias in favour of male children is not only highly evident but openly practised 'ironically' mostly by mothers and grandmothers. Boys are given every educational opportunity usually at the expense of all other female siblings in the family. Regardless of how I perceived inequity, the decision of my parents was law unto itself. I was a product of the inequitable family environment. The inequitable treatment in my favour as a male child did not come about with the 'little emperor' mentality of modern China but rather as a family insurance and bet on the potential human jackpot of the future. Though favoured and given every encouragement to excel, I was groomed to shoulder the responsibilities of the whole extended family. These responsibilities include providing for the basic needs of the family, such as a roof over their heads, financial support for the parents and younger siblings, and care of the aged members of the family while providing for my own immediate family. The decision to have a smaller size family in my case was the direct result of my past experience. Instead of nine children as in the case of my parents, my wife and I have two children.

The grooming of a young boy to take on the responsibilities of the whole extended family began in the early 1960's when my father took on the job of a sailor. While my father was away for months on end, I assumed the role of, 老二 'the number two' in the family, a title my younger siblings address me with until today, after my mother who I regard as the family matriarch. Although I have an elder brother and an elder sister, neither one of them assumed a prominent role in the family as my elder brother was dispatched to a distant village to gain high school education while my sister,

though second only to my mother in terms of managing household chores, was a female child. During the formative years of my childhood between the age of nine and 13, that is, between 1964 – 1968, I was indeed an adult in a child's body!

My typical day would begin about 4 o'clock in the morning in the rubber garden and end at 10 o'clock at night when school homework was completed following the locking away of the chickens in their sleeping pens in the silence of the night with only the eerie hooting of owls in the distance. The day began with rubber tapping which was followed by collecting of the latex, processing of the rubber sheets and drying them before heading to school (refer to Figures 4 to 8). Other alternative chores, particularly on weekends, included tending the paddy field, feeding animals and collecting firewood in the nearby jungle. The best activity would have to be fishing on weekends in the river, Sg. Bubu, that separated my house, that is, Household 43 from Household 44 (see Figure 11). This was just about the only activity that was both fun and profitable as it provided a free source of protein for the family.



Figure 4: *A typical rubber garden in the 1960's adjacent to a jungle in Borneo (Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Chinese Annual Conference Board of Literature)*



Figure 5: *Rubber knife used for rubber tapping*



Figure 6: *Rubber latex being collected into a bowl²*

² This is a more modern method of rubber tapping. In the 1960's the rubber tapping was done from top right to lower left. Tapping is done by making an incision in the bark of the rubber tree in order to let out the latex. After tapping the latex flows along the incision down into the five inch bowl held in place in between two grooved metal strips planted into the side of the tree trunk. The top strip is to guide the flow the latex into the bowl and also to hold the bowl in place with the support of the bottom strip. The latex is gathered after two or three hours and taken to the processing plant to be mixed with formic acid and water in rectangular tins until it coagulates. After which it is tipped out of the tins and trampled on until it is flatten and rolled in rollers.



Figure 7: *Plane rubber sheet rolling machine*³



Figure 8: *Patterned rubber sheet rolling machine*⁴

This harsh reality encultured in me as a boy a work ethic of endurance and resilience without too much concern about the issue of equity or purposefulness. It was

³ The plane rolling machine is used to roll the coagulated rubber into plane rubber sheets (in between the adjustable plane rollers) in order to squeeze out the water content by turning the handle attached to the lower roller on the right.

⁴ The plane rubber sheets are finally rolled in between the two patterned rollers in order to imprint the pattern onto the sheets. They are then dried in the sun for a week or so and then smoked in a smoke house for a week or so. Only then they are ready for the market.

character building and leadership training at its most basic level and yet most impacting on my life. The assumption of roles and responsibilities under great pressure and trying circumstances has been a catalyst to me in all the endeavors of my adult life. The lived experience created a 'can do' attitude in me regardless of circumstances. The lived experience encultured my beliefs, values and practices in all my professional practices whether I practised as a school practitioner, teacher educator, a Senior Human Resource Manager or a General Manager.

OTHER ENCULTURATION INFLUENCES

Apart from the universal truths and my lived experience as the number two in the family that had been encultured me in a number of ways, other influences included the La Salle Christian Brothers, my Christian faith and my success stories, all of which contributed towards the shaping of my *autoculture*.

The La Salle Christian Brothers

Where my parents left off in the indoctrination of the universal truths, the La Salle Brothers from Ireland continued and reinforced, although in a more benevolent way, when I was admitted into the best school in the state. A village boy who had never left home for any extended period of time and being the only boy from the countryside, I was compelled to mingle with the town boys and the rich. It was an experience of extreme challenge in a new and unfamiliar environment. The new experience drove me to despair, which I attribute to the feeling of disempowerment among the affluent and rich of the student body. Loneliness and above all homesickness also aggravated the feeling of despair.

At the point of giving up and returning to my familiar environment, I was picked up by my school principal who appeared to sense trouble brooding in me. With a gentle voice of encouragement and persuasion I began to notice there was hope out there. I was given every encouragement and help to achieve at the High School by the school

principal which included paying off my school fee out of his own pocket and later, organizing a local government scholarship to sustain me throughout my high school years (1969 – 1975). The encouragement and financial assistance propelled me through three public examinations under the auspices of the Cambridge University of England. To top off the encouragement and support, I was offered a teaching position by the principal to teach at the school two weeks after I completed the final High School public examination. By contemporary standards, I was the envy of my peers.

Although the La Salle Brothers were distinct in terms of their beliefs and perception of education, they were little different in terms of their perception with regard to the universal truths. In fact, their work ethic and their practices closely resembled that of the truths. The idea of ‘no pain no gain’ seems to have been in the foreground of their attitude towards education. Their emphasis on education by their life-long devotion to teaching the young was indicative of their position that education is the key to success. In terms of their practices, it was also clearly evident that education of the young equated to transfer of knowledge from the masters to the students with little room for disagreement. The dominant method of teaching was ‘chalk and talk’ and learning by rote. That was the method of the day and I was made that way!

My Success Stories

My life journey began in a village household (Household No. 43 in Figure 11) in Sibul Division of State of Sarawak, Malaysian on the Island of Borneo (Figure 9). The household was established by my grandfather when he migrated from China with my grandmother following the fall of Chien Kai Chek’s government in China to the Communists under the leadership of Mao Tze Tun. I was born as the third child in a family with eight other siblings and the second son of a subsistent family. My life began in the house flanked on two sides by virgin jungle and a river called Sungei Bubu on the other (in between households 43 and 44 in Figure 11) in the middle of a plot of ten acres of rubber garden established by my grandparents. The following maps (Figures 9 – 11) illustrate the place of my humble beginning



Figure 9: Location of Sibu Town on the Island of Borneo (Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Annual Conference Board of Literature)

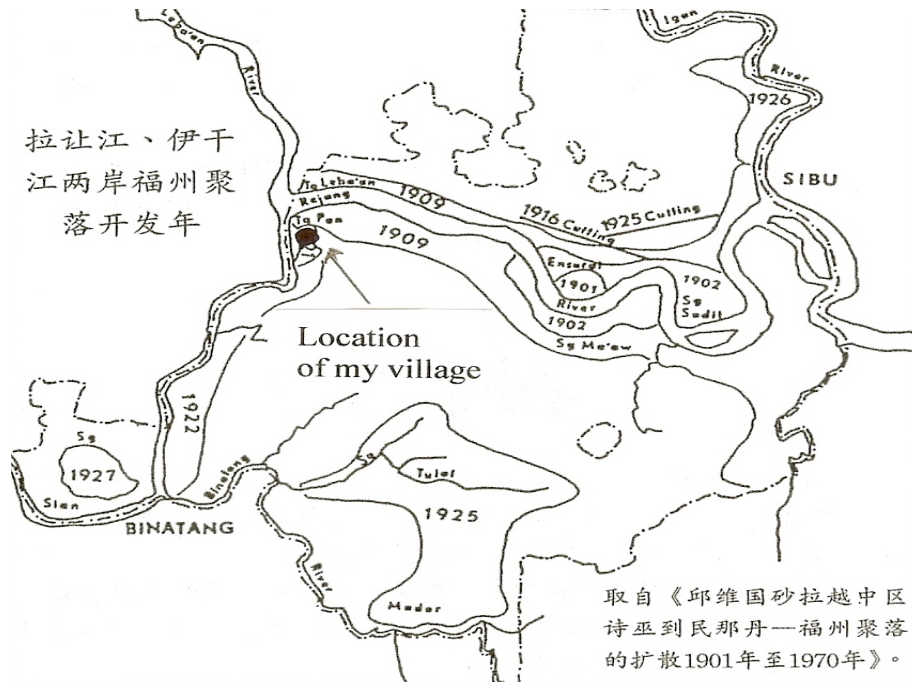


Figure 10: Location and pioneering date of my village (Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Annual Conference Board of Literature).

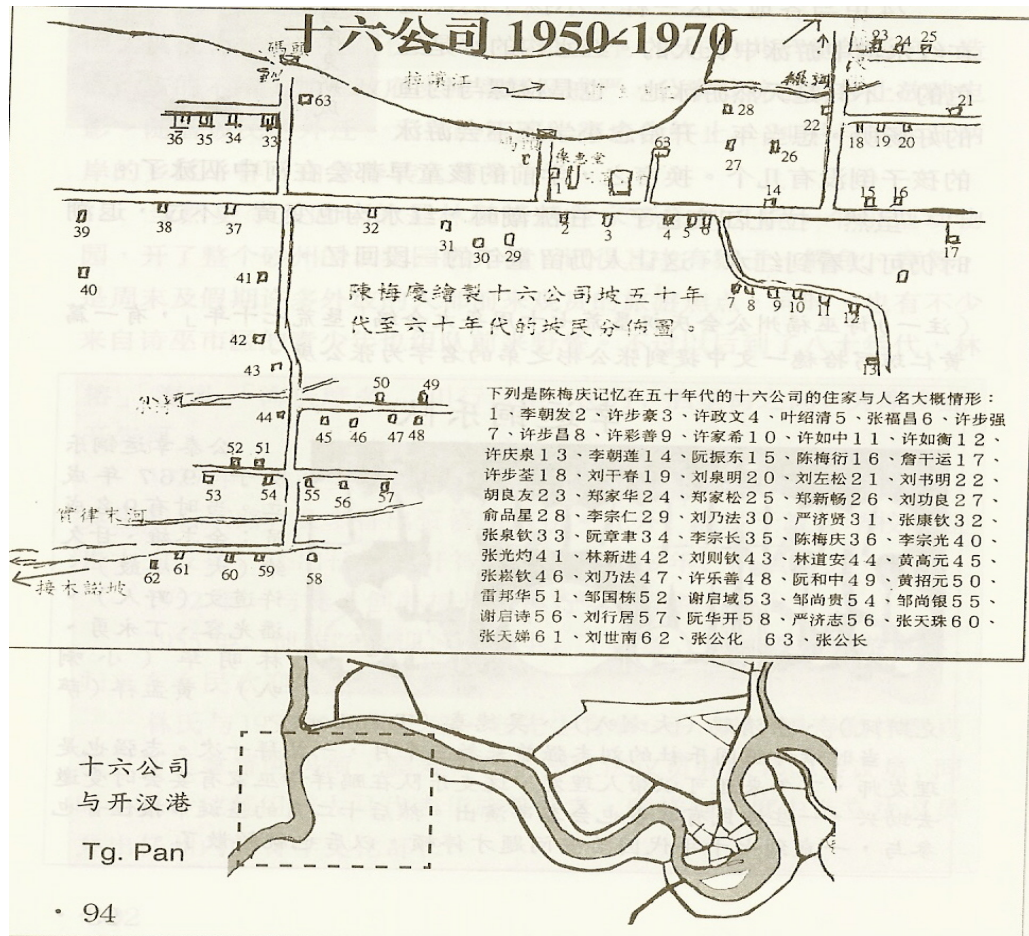


Figure 11: Layout of village households between 1950 – 1970 [Sketched by one of the villagers of the time, Mr. Ting Moi Kheng (Household 36), Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Annual Conference Board of Literature].

The only means of access to and from the village was through an opening along the banks of the Rejang River with a wooden jetty (see Figure 12 below).

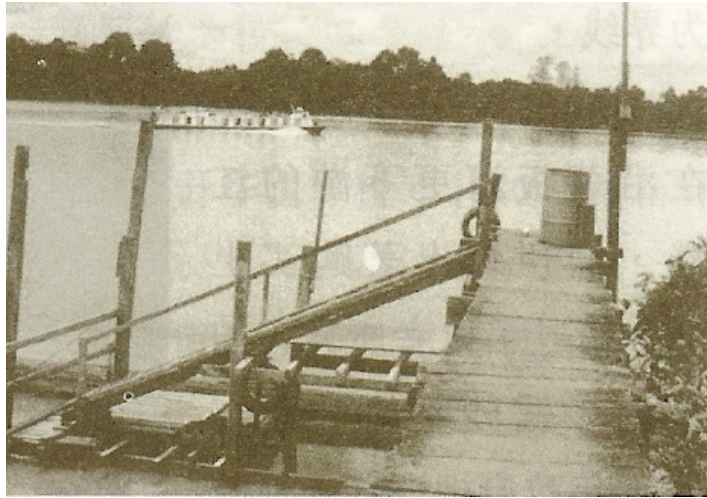


Figure 12: *Wooden jetty in an opening along Rejang River serviced by motor launch*
(*Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Annual Conference Board of Literature*)

The motor launches (a more modern version of one shown in the background of the above photograph) were the primary mode of transport between villages along the banks of the river and were the link between my village and the major towns of Sibul upstream and Binatang, meaning ‘animals’, downstream. The village households were linked together by a network of dirt roads, four feet wide and surfaced by river gravel which would become impassable during the Northeast Monsoon season.

If the universal truths and other influences represent the building blocks of my character, attitude, beliefs, values and practices, then my humble beginning together with my ‘success’ stories would be the cement that holds the building blocks of my character together. One of the earliest success stories would have to be the rescue of my younger sister from our burning house we lived in while I was three years old. The tale was still being recounted during my recent trip back to Sibul in April 2009 by my aunty who lived with us then. I have been branded as the brave one among my elder brother and sister who were five and three years older than me, respectively. They escaped the fire from the house built on stilts and stood watching in the dark while I carried my sick younger sister who could barely walk on my back down the stairs to safety. Once we were at a safe distance, we watched the house being burnt shaking with fear because it was an accident of my doing after wetting myself. I was looking for a pair of clean

pajamas on a canvas bed when the oil lamp tipped onto a pile of clothes and caught fire. The dramatic rescue incident, reiterated over and over again by aunty and mother, served to enculture on me a pro-active and risk taking mentality and perhaps a character filled with adventure or misadventure in a number of occasions.

My success story can be considered to have begun when I started my formal education in a primary school called Kai Hua Primary School⁵ about one hour walking distance away from my house (Household 43 in Figure 11) in 1962. I commuted daily to school on foot following the completion of the first round of household duties. The school day began around noon and finished about five in the afternoon. Each of my school days usually ended with a half to one hour of game of basketball on the court where the students can be seen standing in Figure 13.



Figure 13: *Kai Hua Primary School, 1982 (Courtesy of Sarawak Methodist Chinese Annual Conference Board of Literature)*

The lone standing flag pole in the above picture evoked an emotion of pride as I revisited it as a photographic image. It was at this flag pole that I was selected among about 150 students of the school to lower the Union Jack for the last time and raise the

⁵ The picture shows the total enrolment of the school at the time. It was demolished soon after this photograph was taken due to low student enrolment. The school site since then has been reclaimed by jungle as I passed by on an express boat during my information gathering trip back to Sarawak in April 2009.

Malaysian flag for the first time after Sarawak gained her independence from British colonial rule through the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963.

Throughout the six years of primary school education, I performed well in general in all my school subjects but not without failure in tests, which attracted caning by the subject masters. My best subject would have to be English language where I earned a lot of praise from my English teacher for being able to write English compositions and master rudimentary English grammar in Primary Six. At the end of six years of primary education, a class of twenty-six of us was sent to Sibul town to sit for our Primary Six School Public Examination in 1967. Among the twenty-six, I was one of the three who managed to pass the examination. It was a great honour to the school, my parents, my family and my relatives. Considering a being Primary Six graduate then could earn a person a job as a primary school teacher, the passing of the examination was indeed a great encouragement to me. I could not imagine the consequence if I had failed. Failure to graduate would no doubt end my pursuit of further education as it happened to all my contemporaries then - a reality few would be able to comprehend these days. The graduation not only served to prove the validity of the universal truths, it served to reinforced them and they propelled me onto higher educational aspirations. The success prompted my parents, in particular my mother, to look for the best high school to further my education even though she had little or no formal education. Through sheer determination and will, my parents were able to enroll me in the top high school in the State, the Sacred Heart Secondary School in Sibul. Leaving home for the first time was traumatic. I was compelled to take weekend leave to my home village by the only means of transport, that is, the motor launch (Figure 14). But I was re-united with my family on a permanent basis when my family moved from the village my grandparents established more than half a century ago to town in 1970 because of the security problem brought about by a rise in Communist insurgency in the village. The reunion with my family provided security and stability for me to pursue my high school education. In the following year, that is, 1971 I faced the second public examination in my life which I passed with an overall distinction. It was a great achievement indeed for a boy from a jungle village. Once again, the validity of the universal truths appeared to have been confirmed.



Figure 14: *Motor launch as the only means of transport*

A further affirmation of the universal truths came when I graduated with a Cambridge Senior Certificate in 1973 and a Cambridge Higher School Certificate in 1975. By this stage, I was fully convinced that the universal truths had served me well and guided me through four academic hurdles. Considering my humble origin, graduation from the final public examination of High School evoked a feeling that I was on top of the world and was able to accomplish anything I wanted in my life. This was proven when I was offered a teaching position at the school two weeks after I sat for the final high school public examination. I started teaching in January 1976. It was an almost indescribable feeling when I walked into the school staff room and my former teachers who were my masters had suddenly become my colleagues and greeted me as their colleague instead of a student like in the past.

While I was teaching, my fellow graduates of the High School were heading overseas for their university education. Even though I would have liked to follow in their footsteps, I was prevented to even dream about it considering my obligation to my parents and other siblings who had been my support in the ‘hand to mouth’ existence of the family. After a year of teaching, I managed to save enough money after giving away

most of it to my parents to support the family. Finally I brought up the idea of pursuing a university education to my parents, and even though living below the poverty line they not only agreed to the suggestion but also affirmed that they would do ‘whatever it takes’ to get me to the door of the university. With a heavy heart, I left for England in 1977 with the barest of resources to pursue my life-long ambition of becoming a very well qualified teacher. It was truly the very first time I was on a plane and a trip out of the country. What followed was four years of hard work, not so much concerned with the academic tasks I had to complete to satisfy the university requirements but with the constant struggle to source finance to support my study. I was more concerned with finding jobs to pay for my tuition fees and living expenses than about due dates of assignments and examinations or the start of another academic year, although I was very conscious of the last day of semester or the academic year as it was the day I had the opportunity to work in order to fund my ongoing study. The constant struggle somewhat eased when I graduated with a Bachelor of Education (Hons) from the University of Sunderland in 1981. The graduation opened up a range of opportunities for me, including applying to teach in the prestigious Sandhurst Military College. However, with a little bit of excess finance left following four months of work as a farm labourer after graduation, I decided to further my education at the Master’s Degree level at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in September 1981, and I graduated with the degree in December 1982.

During the course of my postgraduate study, I was selected to be one of the lecturers of the military college, after a brief interview. I was offered the rank of Captain after six months of basic military training. Although the position was extremely attractive in terms of prestige, pay and working conditions, military life as one would expect, was unavoidably regimental and uncertain as it is subject to ‘tours of duty’ in different parts of the world. The offer was at the height of the Falklands war in 1982 between the United Kingdom and Argentina. I was informed that the ‘tour of duty’ would include indefinite assignment onto HMS Ark Royal, the flagship of the British Royal Navy and the command centre of the war. Amidst the reservations and considering that I had been away from home for more than five years and my family obligations, I turned down the lucrative offer. Until today I wonder whether I made the

right decision. Nevertheless, the offer of this prestigious teaching position was a huge morale boost and a belief that I could achieve anything if I had the determination to do so.

Within an hour following the completion of my last postgraduate examination in December 1982, I was on the way home leaving England after more than five years of hard work and worries. By January of 1983, I was offered a position as a high school teacher and started teaching as a graduate. Being the most academically qualified teacher in the school, I was pushed to lead the transformation of different aspects of the school life. One of which was the request of the principal to resolve some of the chronic problems of the school such as truancy, abscondment from school dormitories and low motivation among the students who came mostly from upstream remote villages along the Rejang River. In addition, for no reason apart from a graduate from England, I was asked to teach the English Language which I was least qualified to do. I became an instant English Language teacher – a role I had to take until I put up stiff opposition when I became a college lecturer seven years later.

With my academic qualifications, I enjoyed special status as a high school teacher. When I looked back I regard this as a time I reaped the rewards of my educational success. I was indeed empowered and highly charged with a feeling of efficacy in every aspect of my teaching career. This was topped off with a promotion in 1987 when I was offered a lecturing position in a nearby teacher training college. As academic qualifications were the benchmark of quality and status, I was highly regarded as the only lecturer holding a Masters degree then, and it was also from the country of our former colonial masters. Unwillingly I was pushed onto the frontline, particularly in the area of action research that the college administration and the Teacher Education Branch of the Education Ministry were madly keen about despite the fact that this was an aspect of research I had little or no experience with. Just because the second major of my postgraduate degree was concerned with research methods and evaluation, the college and the Ministry of Education had the wrong assumption of me as an expert in research. Although I felt a sense of pride because of the attention I was getting, it began to put enormous pressure on me to carry an additional load on top of my normal teaching load. After four and half years of feeling on top of my teaching career, the

novelty of being the highest academically qualified lecturer began to wear off. I needed a new challenge to 'spice up' my teaching career. That was when I started to pursue my ambition to teach at university level. Spurred on with our concern for the future of my two young children aged six and seven then, my wife and I decided to migrate to Australia without much hesitation in the beginning of 1992.

The universal truths had been the guide for my success in life so far. However, they were severely challenged and tested when I migrated to WA. Although I was seeking new challenges in life, the reality of living in a different country began to dawn on me. I was no longer the 'tall poppy', I was but another number in the crowd. The support and assistance I was able to muster, the prestige and status I used to enjoy both in professional practice and in my family suddenly vanished into thin air. In a sudden flash, I felt a sense of helplessness and disempowerment. I was at serious threat of 'going under' after coming down under. At this point, various thoughts ran through my mind, the universal truths, though perhaps still holding true in me, would not be sufficient to see me through the trials and tribulations as a new migrant. Spurred on by social inequity and racism, experienced or perceived or otherwise, I finally returned to my familiar hunting ground back home in Malaysia. The return to Malaysia marked the end of my success stories as a practitioner in education and the beginning of my life in the corporate sector.

The beginning of my career in the corporate sector was attributed to the mentoring and encouragement of a university Associate Professor of Education Policies and Administration, Dr. Norm Hyde, who has since passed away. Working under him as a Research Assistant in several State and Federal funded research projects, I gained some understanding and knowledge related to leadership and management. With his encouragement, I answered an advertisement for the position of Senior Human Resource Manager of a group of Malaysian companies with operations in different parts of the world. It was my first formal job application as a professional and was followed by the first formal interview in my life. The ease of gaining the position came with a sense of achievement in life in my familiar territory.

Looking out the glass window of my 7th floor office in a modern city office tower with a panoramic view of the whole city in front of me, I felt as if I was on the top

of the whole world again. Considering that the executive position involved training and building the capacities of the work force of the companies, I felt consoled – whatever I had failed to achieve in education had been ‘compensated’ by the training of a workforce in different management skills. This was a time when I felt I had become a real ‘professional’ in management involved in the writing, compilation and delivery of management training courses for nearly three years. It was also the first time I tasted the authority as a ‘boss’ over my team of managers and executives, leading them in planning and executing plans of a human resource arm of the group and a training institute with a library and company gallery attached to it and a teaching restaurant. Due to my links with Australia, I was entrusted to be liaison person with prestigious institutions such as CSIRO of Australia and TAFEWA in the provision of services to the workforce for the group of companies. The sweet taste of success, however, did not last long when the Asian countries experienced a financial melt down in the late 1990’s. Although my position was not under threat, funding for human resource development had dried up by the end of 1998. I was confronted with an agonizing dilemma, to weather through the economic storm or to abandon ship after three years of success. Considering my experience as a ‘fly-in fly-out’ jet-setting company executive which had began to take a toll on my relationship with my two teenage children, the latter seemed to be the better option for me to take. The success story ended in 1999 when I returned to Australia as an unemployed executive to reconsider my career options.

A year had passed after returning but the sweet taste of success in corporate sector still lingered. This combined with the boredom associated with unemployment eventually propelled me to resume the role of a ‘fly in fly out’ executive again when I took on the position of General Manager of another group of companies in Malaysia. Although I felt a great sense of success in being able to land a big position, the position came with huge pioneering responsibilities. It involved controlling and managing almost every function of the companies in the planning, execution and management of several agricultural projects with international and local political connections. The feeling of empowerment and authority was overwhelming when budgets of millions of dollars were executed and hundreds of employees were under my control. The responsibilities of the position and my work ethic encultured in me over the years

eventually began to take a toll on my health. The success, if I can call it, however lasted only two years following a brief period of hospitalization. For the first time, I began to realize that there were limits to what I could achieve. The universal truths are ‘challengable!’

Although success in my academic pursuits and career might have impacted greatly on my character, my role in my family would have an equal influence on me. Being the most influential member of my family, due probably to my academic success, I was one of the major decision-makers in the family. My decisions had influenced the place where the family stayed and the family business ventures. At times, my decisions were almost law to the family. Being a major decision-maker and a leader in the family, however, also came with huge responsibilities to care and provide for the family ever since my primary school days. For instance, running the family piggery was almost my sole responsibility which involved raising the young piglets, butchering, sale and management of all financial transactions associated with it. It was a life of sacrifice to ensure the well being of my family, in particular, the formal education of all my younger siblings. My life would have to be an example of extreme struggle. Nevertheless, it was a character-building struggle which has contributed towards the shaping of my attitude to life.

My Christian faith

The universal truths, and the success stories aside, it is my religious conviction that has impacted greatly on my adult life. Prior to my conversion, the universal truths, my work ethic inspired by the universal truths, and the successes of the past had served me well, but my conversion to Christianity resulted in a fundamental shift in my attitude in life. It began with a traveling Methodist Minister who was the pastor of the local church next to the school (Figure 15) and who was also the treasurer of the school board. He was the person I had to confront with fear every month not because he was in any way fearful, but because he was the one who came with a receipt book to ask for my school fees and those of my siblings. During hard times I had to avoid crossing paths with him as he went around on his old rusty 24-inch push bike collecting children’s school fees. It was

during one of the meetings with him that I was asked to come to church in 1961. After a brief talk with him, I was baptized with three other of my siblings in the church constructed by my close to genius carpenter uncle – my father’s younger brother (Figure 15 below).



Figure 15 *The opening ceremony of the village church (on right)*⁶.

However, neither the early baptism nor the influence of the La Salle Brothers was responsible for my true conversion to Christianity. Despite their dedication to the Christian faith and the nurturing of the young, the Christian Brothers did not compel me to follow their foot-steps into their Brotherhood. Nevertheless, opportunities were provided for all students in the school to learn the teachings of the Bible regardless of their religious background. In fact most of my Muslim classmates in school were equally well versed in the Bible teachings as any other students in the school! Although I had previous contact with the teachings of the Bible through the village Methodist Minister, it was the Brothers who grounded me with ‘head knowledge’ of Christianity. The idea of a ‘living God’ or a real God never crossed my mind while I was in school

⁶ The church building has since been demolished, in 1984, and the materials were used in my maternal grandmother’s village for an education building (on left). The site has also been over-run and reclaimed by the jungle after more than half a century of growth and prosperity.

and I was never persuaded or led to think along that line either. What I had was head knowledge of a series of historical events, as in the Old Testament and a fictional story about Jesus Christ in the New.

What appeared to be head knowledge eventually effected a dramatic transformation in my perception of the universal truths, or in fact my view to life, with the realization of a metaphysical dimension of life in an inexplicable incident that occurred in 1978. It was the time when I was due to be rejected in my re-enrolment into the second year of my degree course. The failure to re-enroll would amount to termination of my undergraduate studies and thus render me ineligible to remain in England for any longer than three weeks. The ramification of such an event would be unimaginable. It would be no less than tragic considering the loss of honour and years of saving of the family. It would have plunged my family into further debt with little chance of recouping and would have been an overall disappointment for my parents who had sacrificed almost every bit of financial resources to invest in me for future financial security and a better life for the whole family. Confronted with such an extreme threat, I was forced to consider all options including calling on the God whom I had learned about during my school days. A final decision was made to approach the Local Council where the university fee was to be paid, to inquire of any options that would prevent the deregistration of my enrolment with the University. Trembling with fear, I was led to meet the registrar in charge of University Fee payment at the Council Office. Following a brief introduction, I was asked to sit in silence while she checked through my records. After two or three minutes, she responded with a smile and said, “Your fee has been paid in full for the year.” My immediate reaction was one of annoyance at her joking about a serious problem. I really needed some convincing. I insisted that there must have been a mistake. After another round of checking through the records, she responded with a stern voice which still echoes in my ears to this day, “There is no mistake! Unless you want to pay again, I’ll be happy”. Only then did the answer begin to sink into my head. Knowing that it would be futile to continue arguing with her, and in addition she gave me a receipt for the mysterious payment, I left the Office to ponder and guess who might have paid the fee that saved my dream and the dream of my whole family. For months I was wondering and checking with different people who might

have paid the fee for me but without success. The mystery remains unsolved to this day. Since there were no other possible explanations, I came to believe it was a miracle because I had earlier asked God for assistance. The “Ask, it shall be given unto you” message in Gospel of Matthew began to take hold in my mind. It was fitting at the time as the message came through Jesus Christ’s preaching about not to worry about tomorrow⁷. For the first time in my life, I came to realize that there is a metaphysical dimension in life. The transformation began to impact on my life from that time onward. My view of education began to shift from one of mere transfer of knowledge that requires the receiver to practice absolute obedience and acceptance to one of love and concern for the young, including the passing on of my belief in God to the young directly or indirectly. This view has sustained me even in the most difficult of times in my life and career as a migrant teacher in this country.

Belief in the living God is not, however, a replacement of my belief system but an additional one. The former often serves as a guide for the latter in my life. The belief in the living God was particularly emphasized when I migrated to this country. The reality and the challenges of the unfamiliar world of new cultures and social environments prompted me to turn to God for divine guidance and comfort. Apart from faith, the belief also inspired me to take an active role in Christian outreach activities with the Corrective Services Department prisons and Immigration Department of Australia detention centres and in different local churches. The belief led me to the top of the local church hierarchy and to the establishment of a church in 1996. Coincidence or blessing of God, my poverty stricken life in Australia as a migrant took a dramatic turn around in that year. Reflecting on the harsh lifestyle of my immediate family and my parents, I have little doubt about the reason for my current material success.

CONCLUDING REMARK

My success stories have served to affirm my belief system as they have moulded me as I am. Although the echo of the universal truths has waned over the years, particularly after my conversion to Christianity, they have nonetheless ‘encultured’ and ‘colonized’

⁷ Matt. 6: 25 – 34 of the Holy Bible

me. They have shaped me and made me who I am today. With a mindset nurtured in the universal truths, affirmed by the success stories and guided by my religious conviction, a new personal worldview to life has dawned and a new 'me' has come into being. Based on it, I have interpreted and made sense of my lived experience as a migrant school practitioner in different government schools in WA. The interpretation and sense-making of the critical incidents are described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Reliving My WA Teaching Experiences

OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 is a self-narrative of incidents encountered during my practice as an Asian migrant school practitioner in three different Government senior high schools¹ in WA by dramatic recall. This is followed by a preliminary interpretation and sense-making of the incidents from my cultural and experiential perspectives. The concurrent process of narrating, interpreting and sense-making of the critical incidents is an emergent and a gradual process of foregrounding my deep-seated cultural beliefs and values which is assumed to be the ideological foundation upon which my interpretation and sense-making of the critical incidents were made and described.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

It was Monday 9 July 2002 when I headed for Lakeview Senior High School in my 1989 Mitsubishi Colt, probably puffing with smoke – a journey that felt like it would never end. It was only the excitement of resuming my teaching career that kept me going. Entering the school gate felt like going into a farm with buildings separated seemingly by patches of ‘jungle’ between them. The experience reminded me of home on Borneo Island – where one is surrounded by large shady trees. Even the reception looked ‘woody’ and ‘shady’. My quiet entry into the Admin Office was only interrupted when the receptionist inquired of my business with a cold face and a deep voice. Her facial appearance only changed when I introduced myself as a new staff member of the school. As I was expected in the school that morning, I was ushered into the Acting Principal’s office almost immediately. The Acting Principal (AP) stood up from the middle of his ‘busyness’ and greeted me with a hand-shake that almost took off my whole arm.

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

AP: Welcome to our school Geoff. It is nice of you to have come to fill in for Mike who has taken off for his long service leave.

Me: Thank you for having me Mr. Thomas.

AP: Don't thank me because I am only the Acting Principal. It was the Principal who offered you the job. And don't call me Mr. Thomas. Call me Josh. That's what everybody in school calls me.

Me: Alright.

AP: Let's get down to business. First, I would like you to have this folder (School Behaviour Management). Go through the folder in the next day or two. The school expects you to follow all these rules and procedures. Make sure that you have got all the forms you need. They are all in the folder.

(As I browsed through the folder, I could see section after section of procedures about the management of student discipline. Following which was about five minutes of silence which seemed never end as he continued typing on his computer keyboard. Finally...).

I am sorry because I have some unfinished business to attend to before our PD this morning... in half an hour.

Me: I understand.

AP: Geoff, to be very frank with you. I don't really care how you do it, if you could keep the kids reasonably well behaved, I will be happy. If you could help them to learn a bit of the language (Indonesian), it would be a bonus.

Me: I'll try my best.

AP: Do you have any questions?

(Not wanting to be stuck in the cold, dull and uninspiring room with a 'cornered' Acting Principal any longer I responded quickly to the relief of both of us).

Me: Not at this stage.

*AP: Can you please ask Marg in the office to show you to the staff room?
We'll have PD in a few minutes.*

*(I left AP's office and headed back to the reception. Marg took me to the
Staff Room)*

Marg: Here you are. That's our staff room. Make yourself comfortable.

Me: Thank You. (Marg left in a hurry).

Leaving the Principal's office was a relief because of the physical environment and the body language of the Acting Principal attributable to, I believe, his 'unfinished' business before the professional development (PD) session. I had been expecting the 'usual' of a briefing: the history, the success, the great facilities and fantastic staff of the school. But it was all to do with policies and procedures of behaviour management, not dissimilar to the briefing when I took on the duty of a warden of two student dormitories as high school teacher in Malaysia. The briefing sounded an alarm bell and conjured a picture of chaos reminiscent of the 'Bronx Zoo'² in me. As I sat in a corner of the staff room waiting for the staff to arrive for the PD, in amongst the chattering of a few female staff about their holidays, I was left to ponder whether I had made the right choice to resume my teaching career after a fifteen year³ break from teaching in high school, particularly in this country. The briefing appeared to convey a message that maintaining discipline had a higher priority than the education of the children. I was led to believe the students were probably not 'willing' vessels of knowledge or had *laissez-faire* attitude towards life which would be in direct opposition to my cultural expectation. It was against such a psychological backdrop that my teaching career was about to resume.

While I was still pondering about the future, the Acting Principal emerged through the staff room entrance at a frantic pace, eager to get the proceedings of the day started. Following a brief welcome back message and an introduction of two other new teachers, he went straight on to the agenda which he referred to as the 'chores' of the day. The PD proper began with an introduction of a Ministry personnel who was to speak on behaviour management. The introduction conveyed a strong confirmatory

² A US drama series based in the town, Bronx in the 1980's about a troubled school.

³ I last taught as a high school teacher in April 1987.

message that I was heading for troubled water and expecting a rough ride. At the same time, I began to ask myself, 'Is there anything else this school is concerned about? What about student motivation? What about...? What about...?' Amidst the murmuring of the staff who were still excited about their holiday, the PD session on behaviour management started in a somber mood. The staff appeared to remind themselves that the holiday was truly over and they were back into the daily grind of the school. Initially, they appeared to be positive, listening to the talk on techniques of behaviour management. However, after about fifteen minutes or so, I noticed most staff had their heads down, seemingly oblivious to what was being delivered. Seated relatively to rear of the staff room, I began to notice cartoons and sketches of various descriptions taking shape on their note pads. This was in serious contrast with what I regarded as and expected of a PD, probably attributed to my past experience as a teacher educator in Malaysia where PDs were presentations of action research findings by colleagues on the subject of student learning that concerned them. Although the presentation of this PD session was very professionally executed, I detected a sense of skepticism amongst the staff about the Ministry personnel's understanding of the local school environment and also a covert sense of opposition to being 'talked' to or 'talked' down to. There was an obvious barrier to communication between the Ministry personnel and the staff. Seemingly there was a scenario of employer-employee relations where the Ministry personnel was the employer's representative while the staff were the employees who were being given duties and responsibilities to take on even though the PD was concerned with useful techniques that staff could use to manage student behaviour.

The priority given to student behaviour management both in the briefing and PD served as a confirmation of a troubled time ahead. Amidst the doom and gloom, I reminded myself to remain positive considering what I had experienced since arriving in this country about ten years ago. 'It could not be any worse than that', I consoled myself. After all, discipline had been the key to success in the school system where I started my education and teaching career, and thus teaching in the school should not be too dissimilar to what I used to do. School students in Malaysia followed a strict discipline code; learned mostly by disciplined memory work; regarded teachers as

masters of knowledge and skills; and thus students were required to be willing vessels of knowledge. Based on these understandings, my teaching career began in this country.

MY FIRST DAY OF TEACHING IN WA

I resumed my teaching career in Lakeview Senior High School on the second day of the third term of 2002. Before I began my first lesson, my Head of Learning Area (HOLA) gave me a personal briefing on issues such as daily journal, behaviour management procedures, location of resources, departmental duties and other minor issues. The briefing ended with a promise of seemingly unlimited support, particularly in management of student discipline, and advice about the importance of establishing a good relationship and rapport with students in order to facilitate student behaviour management and classroom learning.

Feeling confident because of the promise of the ‘undying’ support of the HOLA, I headed for my first lesson in this country. As I entered a rather ‘tired’ and run-down classroom with half the curtains dropping down, old television and computer sets stacked at the back of the classroom, I was greeted by the class like I was used to and with my name, Mr Law as well. It was a pleasant surprise and a great relief to me. Feeling quietly confident, I thought teaching may not be as bad as I had first imagined. Before long, I noticed hands going up in the air indicating students were eager to catch my attention. What followed was an hour of questions and answers, but it was a mind opening and icebreaking session. By the time the siren sounded, I could sense that the students were satisfied with what they had gotten out of me in terms of who I am. At the same time, I was put at ease feeling that although the students may be a bit too upfront and confronting, particularly the girls about my marital status, they were genuinely interested to know who I am. The series of questions and answers continued similarly for all the classes I entered for the rest of the day. Despite all my reservations prior to the first lesson, the day passed without any incident and it was a nerve calming series of five lessons. When the last siren went for the day, I was quietly confident that teaching in this country may not be too different from that where I had come from after all.

Apart from the curiosity factor that worked well on the first day, the promise of support from the HOLA was another major factor that was ‘nerve’ calming and confidence boosting. There was a definite sense of teamwork and team support – an aspect of teaching praxis rarely practiced in my teaching career prior to this day. The praxis of the teaching profession in the past was individualistic and independent, where individual school practitioners were practicing primarily on their own with only occasional collegial cooperation in areas such as workload distribution.

JUSTIN VERSUS JUSTINE

Two weeks following the resumption of my teaching career in this country, I began to detect a feeling of ‘weariness’ amongst some of the students when they were asked to complete set exercises. One or two were daring enough to question me about the very purpose of learning another language and the set exercises they had to complete. Although most of the students seemed to accept that their responsibility in school was to learn to the best of their ability, a significant number opposed to the idea of learning another language. There was a definite resentment towards the language, and thus mixed interest in the language. It was under such a cloud of ‘discontent’ that one of the students who was asked to return to his seat and continue his set worksheet exercise swore at me. Although it was barely audible, it caused a stir in the class. With little choice, I had to detain him over lunch and ask him to complete a form detailing the particulars of his offence, his admission of guilt and a behavior contract. This should have been the end of the first major discipline incident of my teaching career in this country. But I was never so wrong to think so when I was contacted by the student’s mother, Mrs. Lanton (ML).

ML: I am Justin’s mother. Are you Justin’s teacher?

Me: Yes I am. What can I do for you?

ML: Justin was very upset yesterday when he came back from school. He told me that you have been calling him names. He has been very hurt by you

and that's why he does not want to go to school until you apologize. How could you do such as a thing as a teacher?

Me: Excuse me, Mrs Lanton. I can't recall calling any names apart from actual names of students.

ML: Well Justin told me you have been calling him 'Justine' and that's degrading for a boy of his age.

Me: I am sure I know the difference between 'Justin' and 'Justine'. But I am really sorry if he is feeling hurt. I'll be more careful next time.

ML: Because of your name calling, he was upset and not attentive in class yesterday. How could you detain him at the lunch-time? That's really ridiculous! How could you pick on him?

Me: Mrs Lanton, I can explain what happened yesterday. He was detained not for anything else but swearing in class.

*ML: Never, my boy never swears!
(Phone went dead).*

I was expecting more to come. True enough. The next day, before I could go to my department office to offload my belongings, I was called to the Deputy Principal's Office with a middle age gentleman already in waiting. I was expecting the worst.

Deputy: Good morning Geoff.

Me: Good morning.

Deputy: This is Justin's father, Mr Lanton (ML). He has come to talk about what happened in Justin's class two days ago. Justin's mother complained that you have insulted Justin. He wanted to hear what you have to say (I believe he is expecting an apology from me).

Me: Well, Mrs. Lanton called me yesterday after school and told me that Justin was very upset and would not want to come to school until I apologize about the name calling.

Deputy: What name calling?

- Me: He thinks I am calling him 'Justine' instead of 'Justin'. I am sure I know the difference between the two. In any case, I have apologized and promised to be more careful next time. But I told her that Justin was probably upset because of the detention for swearing in class.*
- ML: So that's the matter!.*
- Me: Mr. Lanton, you would understand that our school has a discipline code that every student has to adhere to and there are standard procedures that each one of us has to follow in maintaining order in the school.*
- ML:: Call me Jim. I have no problem with that. I'm sorry for putting you through all this. Justin has been a 'mummy boy' and he gets away with everything at home, particularly with his older sister who also studies here. I'll explain to her about exactly what happened. Sorry to have bothered you.*
- Me: That's ok. (With a handshake Mr. Lanton left the room).*
- Deputy: Thank you for coming in.*
- Me: You're welcome (I left for class).*

The incident was indeed a reality check and a reminder of the troubled water ahead. Although student discipline was within my expectation, I was struck with a deep sense of disbelief of how little support the parent had for the school in nurturing her son. I had a feeling that teachers are always perceived to be at fault until proven otherwise. Teachers have to be accountable for every action they take and the accountability has overtaken every other priority in the school. As an Asian migrant school practitioner grounded in the mindset that teachers are always right until proven otherwise, the incident caused me to review my willingness to take any corrective actions of any kind unless absolutely necessary. The incident created a sense of insecurity and disempowerment as I had to be accountable for whatever action I took to discipline students. The incident instilled in me a fear of the 'unknown' – not knowing how the parents of students would react to whatever corrective actions I might take to address

disciplinary problems in class due to my limited understanding of the local culture and values, particularly with regard to education. The fear, to a large extent, contributed to my inaction in a number of cases which I would otherwise take under normal circumstances. The fear was debilitating and disempowering.

The organizational culture did not help either. The school regarded the parents as the clients instead of supporters of their children's education in school as I was indoctrinated and nurtured. Apparently, the school culture appeared to suggest that "customers are always right!" Indeed this was made explicit by the deputy following the 'name-calling' incident. It appeared to me that the parents determined the very existence and survival of the school, and the school staff members were at the mercy of the parents in terms of their employment and welfare. The school practitioners appeared to be mere contractors employed to deliver a range of services in school and paid a contract fee. The fact that I was a fixed term contract teacher also served to reinforce my feeling of being a contract worker for the Education Department of WA. The incident provided grounds for me to perceive teaching here in WA as being similar to any other job rather than a life-long profession. Even though teaching has been my life-long passion, the incident together with the apparent entrepreneurial school organizational culture, and the idea of a fixed term contract combined, however, had greatly shaken my perception as a school practitioner. My passion for nurturing the young had been greatly challenged and battered. A sense of inefficacy and disempowerment was never too far away from me since that day when I first began teaching in this country.

BUREAUCRATIC SLAVERY

Bureaucratic dependency was the hallmark of management of a deputy principal of Valley View Senior School I served in 2003. He executed the school discipline management policy with little variation from the student behaviour management manual which had specific and text-book style procedures to follow in dealing with student discipline. As a new teacher at the school, I was aware of the procedures but did not expect to follow every detail of them as there were grey areas and classroom level

circumstances that would warrant variation to the procedures. It was upon such an understanding that one day I dealt with two problem students.

Story Of Brendan And Emily

The school siren went to recommence class after recess. As expected, students were a little bit unsettled for the first five minutes. Brendon and Emily were no exception. They seemed to be excited about something during recess. However, as the class settled down to the usual routine of silent reading before a class presentation, Brendon and Emily appeared to have a lot more to go on with and tried to get the attention of other students who were in preparation for their presentation. After two warnings, they persisted with their undesirable behaviour with their 'stories'. Their names were recorded on the board in expectation of a documented follow-up after the lesson was over. However, when they persisted with their disruptive behaviour, Brendon was sent outside the classroom and instructed to sit at a desk⁴ in my view to continue his preparation, to which he complied. However, when Emily was asked to sit facing the wall to continue her preparation, she poked her tongue out at me and that caused a disturbance in the class. She was given her marching orders to the Admin Office with an escort with a brief note about her 'tongue poking' antic. Within five minutes, a stern looking and unhappy face appeared behind me with Brendan in tow. It was the Deputy Principal, Nigel. His sudden appearance caused a stir in the class and students could detect something unpleasant was going to happen.

Me: Good morning. Mr. Schultz

Nigel: Geoff, why did you send Emily to me without any proper paper work?

Me: I am sorry, I meant to follow up with the paperwork after the lesson. Have you got the note I send down to you through Lisa?

Nigel: Yes. But did you give her any warning?

Me: Yes.

Nigel: How many?

⁴ In accordance with the isolation policy of the school

Me: Twice.

I was interrogated in front of the class with a series of questions. He paused seemingly unconvinced that I had given two warnings before the removal of the students from class. There was a few seconds of silence when I could hear the students murmuring seemingly to say that “Mr. Law is in trouble”. With a bit of annoyance and disbelief, I pointed him to the board which read as follows:

Warnings

Brendan XX

Emily XX

Me: Can you see on the board, I have given both of them two verbal warnings already before they were sent out.

Nigel: OK but you shouldn't really send Brendan outside. (Turning to Brendan). Brendan you can go and get on with your work.

Brendan: Yes. Mr. Schultz

Nigel: Can you prepare your paperwork and have it on my desk before the end the day?

Me: I'll do that.

Nigel: Thank you

(The deputy walked out of the class without saying anything else).

Reflecting on all the student disciplinary incidents in the past, this particular incident would have to be the most demoralizing as it occurred in full view and knowledge of the students. If both of us had the chance to re-live the experience I believe we would rather avoid this damaging public ‘show down’.

While the need for the bureaucracy appeared to be necessary as part of the school system in this country, the circumstance at the time, in my opinion, did not warrant it. Considering the Deputy Principal barely had any knowledge of the incident, his abrupt decision and action at the time would have several implications for the management of

student behaviour in the school. One of the most obvious effects of his decision and action would have to be the disempowerment of a teacher, which I experienced when enforcing class discipline. When the Deputy could easily overrule a teacher's classroom level decision, a clear message would have been sent to the students that teachers have little direct authority over them. This was clearly exhibited by Brendan when he was asked by the Deputy to return to class without prior consultation with me as to the reason for him being isolated. The student knew full well that I could not take action against him until I completed the paperwork, which was almost impossible to do at that particular moment while there were several students in class like him who required constant attention and supervision. The siren spelt the end of the 'sorry' lesson and my immediate feeling then was 'why bother?' Walking away appeared to be the best solution. Alternatively, though it may sound unprofessional, I was prepared to 'graduate' the poorly behaved to the next level to enable them to be removed from class at the first sign of trouble. Each of these feelings was neither beneficial to myself or to students nor to the overall management of the school discipline.

The incident also pointed out to me the low level of support that a teacher could get from the school administration in the maintenance of students' discipline of the school. Apart from being highly demoralizing, the incident amounted to public humiliation which served no purpose apart from disempowering me. Although teamwork and collegiality were enshrined in the school's development plan, they appeared to be mere rhetoric. The need for bureaucracy appeared to have surpassed and suppressed all consideration for teamwork and collegiality. I was in a trapped world of existence within the bureaucracy of the school administration, waiting to be 'freed' at the first opportunity which came at the end of the fixed term contract period in December 2003. Although I had a negative perception of the fixed term contract as a teacher, the end of the fixed term was a welcome relief. Indeed it was an escape for me.

Coming from an environment and culture where students have great respect for teachers and elders, the incident was a direct contrast with my encultured values and beliefs. Apart from feeling disempowered by the Deputy, I was left to feel trapped in a world without support to fend for myself in a 'hostile' school environment. The reality of teaching in this country had struck home – teaching was a mere job like any other.

CONCERTINA WALL

The lack of respect for colleagues was also demonstrated in another public incident involving my Head of Learning Area (HOLA) in the school. It started with a concertina wall that divided a Year 11 and a Year 9 class. I was teaching foreign language in Year 9 while my HOLA taught a class of Year 11 Geography behind the concertina wall. The following is a narrative of the incident.

The piercing sound of the school siren still echoing in my ears, I plodded my way wearily into a class of Year 9 not knowing what to expect while the students were asked to perform group task as I expected them to be noisy and frequently off-task while doing group work. Prior to the lesson, they had been instructed to compile a foreign language story book for primary school children. With the usual exchange of greetings in the foreign language⁵, the students moved hurriedly into groups of two or three in whatever spaces they could find in the room that was partitioned by a concertina wall. It was a pleasant and encouraging sight when I noticed that the students were focused and task orientated without my usual task reminders. Silently I comforted myself: "I must have done something right" in the previous lesson to instill an excitement in students to perform the group task. Maybe the idea of compiling a story book for primary school children had excited them.

Before long, the students were actively engaged and engrossed in their tasks. Some were designing the covers of their book, others were discussing its content and still others were getting the stationeries ready for constructing the book. It was a rare sight that the students were busily engaged in the task they had to complete within a week. An atmosphere of excitement and engagement of energy filled the room. I felt a rare sense of achievement and satisfaction while moving around the class looking at their products and helping them with spelling and translation of words or phrases.

Almost instantly, the productive, busy engaged and encouraging atmosphere was punctured by a student standing up and calling for my attention,

⁵ Indonesian

“Pak Law, look at the wall.” Still holding the pair of scissors she used for cutting out pre-drawn pictures for the story book, she was standing and about to be pushed over together with the chair and desk she was sitting. “I am about to fall over, sir”. True enough, I could see the table was about to tip over as the stationery on the table was rolling off due to the ‘bulging’ wall which was being pushed over by one or two Year 11 students behind it. At a frantic pace, I approached her desk and pulled it forward to prevent it from falling over. The table was relocated about a meter away from the wall to prevent further ‘push over’.

No sooner had the group started to reengage themselves in their tasks, a stout figure with both his hands on his waist appeared at the door raging. Without a word of greeting or permission, he ‘blasted away’ at the top of his voice telling the class to stop wasting time and get on with their work. After a minute of top of the voice lecture, he turned his attention to the student who was nearly pushed over together with her chair and table, and labeled her a troublemaker and time waster. Before I could intervene, he had ordered her out of the room and sent her to the front office for individual attention.

Concerned at the ill-informed punishment, I approached the student during recess in my attempt to console her. Indeed she was extremely upset and felt unfairly treated. During the meeting, I was informed that she was forced to apologize for being a troublemaker and a time waster in the class. Despite the feeling of injustice for the student and the class and the personal insult, I held off my ‘confrontation’ with the HOLA until the following day, expecting some explanation from him for his unjustified outburst in my class.. Seeing that there was neither explanation nor apology, I finally approached him. Before I could explain, an equally unpleasant remark was directed at me: “You could do better in controlling the class.” Knowing that he was not about to listen to any explanation or to apologize, and for the sake of peace of mind for the remaining contract with the school, I left the matter to rest.

The concertina wall saga was another example of a superior who had little respect for fellow teachers. This negative implication had not only impacted adversely on me but also on the students who looked to teachers as role models in the school. The incident had struck at the very core of my expectation of a teacher as one who, though maybe strict, is full of compassion for student learning and welfare, much as I had experienced at my own high school in Malaysia. The incident demoralized me and caused me to wonder whether school teaching in this society is equivalent to running prisons where teachers are lower rank prison guards and students are criminals. The priority seemed to be behaviour modification and manipulation through fear and suppression. If this is so, then the blatant disregard for fellow teachers and miscarriage of justice, whether justifiable or not, is acceptable. As far as the students are concerned, I perceived that their trust for the HOLA had been shattered. Whatever respect they might have left for him would only have to be out of fear of retribution for breaching the school's disciplinary code of conduct. I began to wonder whether this is what teaching was about in this country. If so, I would surely not wish to be part of it.

The action of the HOLA in the concertina wall incident, his subsequent refusal to accept any explanation, and his insulting remarks about my teaching performance combined to utterly degrade my passion for teaching. I felt trapped in an environment of political power play based on status which was clearly evident in the weekly Departmental meetings which were often brief as no one was prepared to participate in the discussion, with the exception of supporting the HOLA's suggestion or opinion. The teachers' job, or at least mine, was reduced to coping with the daily chores that we had to attend to, resembling that of a bread packing assembly line beside a conveyor belt, which I had experienced during my university days. Although teaching had been my life-long ambition, the concertina wall experience together with a few other similar incidents caused me to re-evaluate my future involvement in the profession. Indeed, that was the last time I was involved in a full-time teaching position, and I am not sure I would like to go back to a similar position ever again.

FAILED ASSURANCE

The most empowering assurance provided by the Head of Learning Area (HOLA) involved in the concertina wall incident would have to be his promise of seemingly ‘undying’ support in the management of student discipline. Endowed with such a backing, I felt a great sense of security as I taught LOTE and Society and Environment in the school. The sense of security, however, was shattered when I sought his assistance in one of the most serious discipline incidents. It was an incident when a Year Nine girl seated next to the entrance door of a demountable classroom absconded unexpectedly and went on a window breaking spree outside the classroom for no apparent reasons as there was no previous incidents or issues whatsoever with me or other students of the class as she entered the class for the lesson. Normally she was well behaved and completing her classroom tasks without incident. I regard her as one of the better behaved female students in an average Year Nine class. Due to my duty of care for the rest of the class, I sent a student to inform the HOLA about what had happened and asked for his immediate assistance. The student returned to class and informed me that he would come later because he was busy; meanwhile the girl continued her defiance despite my plea to her through the window she had broken to return to class. About twenty minutes later, my HOLA appeared at the door asking for the offending girl. By then she had gone wandering around the school yard until one of the Duty Principals caught up with her and detained her in the school time-out room pending further action. What followed was a report detailing the incident which I had to complete for his further action. His immediate reaction was one of disappointment with me for failure to prevent such an incident. Considering the assurance he gave me at the beginning of my fixed term contract, I was bitterly disappointed with him and lost all my confidence in him for assistance in time of urgent need. Following a few more incidents of lesser magnitude I came to realize that his assurance of support appeared to be mere rhetoric. The confirmation of such a conclusion came when we met at the end of the year performance management meeting when I was informed that I had failed although I had religiously followed the discipline management procedures that were required of all school staff. It was to the surprise of all my departmental colleagues for they were

aware of my religious following of the discipline procedures. Citing my failure in the management of student behaviour, I was informed by him that my service with the school would not be extended. Before I had a chance to counter his negative assessment of my performance management he directed me to take the matter direct to the School Principal. As the Principal was his subordinate staff member in the Department before he was seconded to be School Principal following a sudden departure of the former School Principal, I was fully aware of his relationship with the Principal, as was all the school staff, I was convinced that it would be a futile exercise and so I left the matter to rest and ended my service with the school two weeks later.

Reflecting on the overall experience of discipline management in school, it appeared to me that bringing disciplinary issues to the HOLA was my error of judgment despite his assurance of support. I have a feeling that such an assurance was the covert way in which the HOLA was assessing my ability to manage discipline in class. My expectation of the standard of discipline was no less than that of what I used to while I was teaching in schools back home. It was probably my expectation of the standard back home prompted me to refer one too many disciplinary cases to him for resolution. But then again, the assurance of support he gave me had provided me with a false sense of security. This has led to a break down of trust and confidence in my superiors. This was very damaging to my morale as an Asian migrant school practitioner until I was appointed to Park View Senior High School on a part-time basis in the following year (2004).

THE REWARD SYSTEM

One of the textbook techniques of student behaviour management is the suggestion of seeking support from parents. With the 'Justin versus Justine' incident still fresh in mind, I had great reservation of such a suggestion and I was very skeptical of what parents in this country could offer in the management of student behaviour in school. After school one afternoon, with a sense of misgiving and as a last resort, and with great reluctance and nervousness, I contacted the father of a student who had been consistently disruptive and apparently attention seeking in class. The phone rang:

- Me: Good afternoon, can I speak to Mr. Thompson?*
- Brett: Speaking. Call me Brett.*
- Me: Hi Brett, I am calling from Valley View Senior High school about Richard, your son.*
- Brett: Oh! What is he up to this time?*
- Me: Nothing much. But I thought I'd just give you a call to encourage him. He has not been doing well in class and is not attentive.*
- Brett: I know he has been disruptive in school. But I thought he had changed recently. He showed me the heap of gold slips he has been given by different teachers of the school. He can't be that bad, can he?*
- Me: No, no, he is not bad but I thought you could give him some encouragement so that he could be more attentive in class.*
- Brett: I find it strange he is still a handful considering he has gotten all the gold slips. Anyway, I'll talk to him when he gets in.*
- Me: Thank you very much Brett.*
- Brett: No worries.*

Though short, this was a nerve racking phone conversation charged with emotion. Although this contact with the parent was not as demoralizing as the previous incident, the indication of displeasure from the parent was clearly detectable. Even though Brett had indicated his son's previous brush with the school discipline code for being a 'handful', the support I got from him in the interest of his son was at most lukewarm - 'I'll talk to him when he gets in later'. This incident was in stark contrast with the support of my parents and parents of contemporary Malaysian students for teachers. It was demoralizing to know that despite my best intention for the betterment of his son, Brett appeared to imply that I was at fault by citing the evidence that Richard had been getting a 'heap of gold slips'. This incident was one of double jeopardy – not only did I not receive the necessary support from the parent for the interest of his son, but it was implied that I was at fault.

Recounting the incident today, I feel maybe that I was at fault because I was not giving Richard gold slips for being punctual, for completing set tasks without leaving his seat and interrupting other students, for not calling out in class or causing mischief in class to get the attention of other students. Through casual conversation with my

departmental colleagues, I came to know that giving him gold slips was the preferred way to pacify him. In my view, this was a defeatist action not too dissimilar to a law enforcement authority giving in to the demands of terrorists, except on a smaller scale. But operating against the social norm and internalized praxis of the local professional culture, however unjustified I perceived it to be, left me feeling vulnerable and insecure. My choice to be different on the grounds of my expectation of students, my belief in fairness and honesty, appeared to have resulted in the dislike of the parent. I was caught in the middle of a 'rock and hard' place in an 'unfree' state of existence.

Parental support aside, the 'gold slips' used in reward system of behaviour management of the school appeared to justify rewarding normal behaviour that is expected of all students, thus creating an expectation amongst students that they would not be rewarded if they were not acting below the expected standard of behaviour. The reward system appeared to perpetuate the practice of rewarding those who acted below the expected standard of behaviour instead of those who acted above the expected standard of behaviour in direct contrast with my belief in fairness and honesty.

Although the days of students being willing vessels of knowledge might have been a distant memory, I believe the fundamentals of educating the young have not changed, in particular an expected standard of behaviour. Students are still expected to acquire knowledge, skill or information through their teachers or their direction, and they still need a basic standard or code of behaviour to enable the educational process to happen. The very basic fundamentals of punctuality, class attendance, and respect for others are the norms passed down from generations past. The reward system appeared to regard these fundamentals as exceptions rather than norms of usual school behaviour and thus the need for them to be 'rewarded' when they occurred. In this way, disruptive students, in particular, are sent a wrong message that compliance with the exceptions would earn them benefit, they would have to step out of the norm in order to achieve the exceptions. It is no wonder they take an anti-fundamental stance in order to achieve their ends. In short, the system appears to perpetuate deviant behaviour amongst the students, and the parents appear to be led to a false sense of achievement of their children. In schools that practice the system of rewarding the disruptive students, one would have little difficulty perhaps in finding that these students are rewarded with most

of the gold slips or similar rewards given out by teachers. While the poorly behaved are getting most of the rewards, what chance do those who abide by the fundamental code of school behaviour have of receiving such reward?

By definition, reward refers to a return for performance of a desired behaviour. The school reward system appears to reward undesirable behaviour considering no reward were given prior to the occurrence of undesirable behaviour. Considering the majority of students who were not rewarded for acting according to the desired code of behaviour of punctuality and respect for others, the system using gold slips appeared to have been executed with the interest of those acted below the standard code of behaviour, and thus was inherently unfair. Realizing the inequity that surrounded the system of reward in the school, and that little could be done about it appeared to frustrate a number of teachers, particularly those who, like me, felt strongly about the issue of equity with regard to rewarding students with poor discipline. Realizing the futility of going against the norm, most teachers appeared to take the option of 'going along with the system'. For new teachers, like me, coming from a cultural background with a set of values and beliefs about student behaviour would inevitably find it frustrating, disempowering and inefficacious.

GETTING USED TO ACCENTS

One of the greatest perceived handicaps of classroom teaching for Asian migrant teachers in this country would have to be communication with the students. Our accents were perceived to be our greatest cross-cultural communication barrier. This barrier had been pointed out by some of my students when I questioned them about the reason for their off-task behaviour. "I can't understand what you are saying" had been one of most common excuses. Such a response pointed painfully to my thought of inability to communicate and thus teach effectively in class. This consciousness had been somewhat disempowering and frustrating for me. However, instead of lamenting over my inadequacy, perceived or otherwise, I took three actions to address the problem. First, as an immediate measure to ensure effective communication of instruction to students I repeated my instructions of classroom tasks and followed up with a question

to ensure they had understood them before they were asked to begin their tasks. With follow-up questions to check on their understanding of their tasks, I left little or no room for them not to understand my instructions. The second action I took was to embark on a process of self-reflection of the cause of the handicap. As I was brought up by Irish La Salle Brothers in my high school days, I could well sympathize with the students who were experiencing difficulty in getting used to a foreign accent. Nevertheless, my experience told me that this difficulty would only be a temporary handicap. Thus, if the students continued to cite my accent as the reason for their off-task behaviour, it would arouse my suspicions of their reason. My third action was an attempt to prove my theory about the temporary handicap of accent in communication with students. This was done frequently with students I did not teach, particularly with those I came in contact with while I was on yard duty. Indeed, I discovered that although a minority of students experienced some difficulty in understanding my accent none misunderstood me completely. One of the critical moments that proved my theory came on one Monday lunch-time when I had a chat with two female students while I was on yard duty. One was my foreign language student, Brianna, and the other, Lorraine, whom I had not met before. The following is a narrative of our conversation.

- Me: Hi Brianna, how are you and how was your week-end?*
- Brianna: Hi Pak Law, I had a great time with my pop and nana up in the farm.*
- Me: Where about is the farm?*
- Brianna: Up in the hills.*
- Me: What did you do? Did you help out the chores? (Brianna has been learning Indonesian and had a lesson on visiting farm).*
- Brianna: Oh yes. I helped to milk the cow, feed the chooks, feed the calves with bottles. I really enjoyed it.*
- Me: That's good.*
(Eager to participate in the conversation, Lorraine said...)
- Lorraine: Why do you call him Pak Law? What did he say?*

Brianna: Pak Law asked me about my visit to my pop and nana last weekend. See you later Pak Law.

(As they were walking away I could hear them talking)

Lorraine: How could you understand him so well?

Brianna: I don't know. I guess it's just how it is.

This incident, though minor, was a confirmation of my suspicion that students who were exposed to a foreign accent would be able to adapt to it without much difficulty, as with my own experience with Irish accent which was extremely foreign for a student like me who had no contact with any Irish or Caucasian person prior to the commencement of my high school education. These reflective actions served to dispel my self-fulfilling prophecy of attributing my inadequate communicative ability to my accent, which otherwise was a frustrating and disempowering belief. Through reflection on the incident I was assured that although one's accent may be a barrier to effective communication, it is only a temporary barrier. The reflection confirmed that the barrier had mostly been a perceived one.

WHY BOTHER LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE

One of the critical elements in the success of teaching a foreign language in this country would have to be the attitude that different stakeholders had for the language. The Curriculum Council of Western Australia⁶ outlined several ideals about learning a language other than English (LOTE). However, most of these ideals appeared to be highly elusive and rhetorical as they were also realizable in the learning of English Language. Nevertheless, the rationale concerning providing students with insights into other cultures and building foundations for their future in terms of employment, travel and personal enjoyment seem to constitute the primary justifications for teaching LOTE.

Operating within a curriculum framework founded on such a seemingly 'shaky' rationale proved to be doubly difficult for me as migrant school practitioner. Not that the rationale is in anyway unsound or inadequate, my experience tells me that LOTE

⁶ In Curriculum Framework, 1998

programs in WA Government schools have been delivered with far less emphasis compared to English Language in almost every way. Cultural differences in terms of background, beliefs, values and work ethic as a migrant teacher appeared to have been a disadvantage already, but I also had to cope with the uphill battle of convincing my students of the positive reasons for learning LOTE. Recalling the comments of parents and teachers over the years, parents often commented that their children were already struggling with English and learning another language was an added and unnecessary burden which their children could do without. This negative attitude appeared to filter down to their children. Considering such negativity with LOTE, it is not too difficult to envisage low motivation in the learning of LOTE at the classroom level. Another typical parent comment was the question of the necessity of learning a LOTE. The parochialism amongst the parents was that there is little need of LOTE for the purpose of employment or travel because English language is one of the most commonly used languages in Asia and other parts of the world already. At the same time, the number of LOTE offered to be taught at the school, in my view, was beyond comprehension. When the system has to embrace a large range of LOTE, it is not too difficult to envisage the problems running the language programs attributed to the limited resources, professional development and staffing.

Analyzing the Curriculum Council's rationale for LOTE and the response of the parents about LOTE over the years, it appears that LOTE was not as valued nor did they have the academic status of other subjects within the school curriculum. The multiplying effect seemed to be a low motivation amongst students to learn and excel in foreign language learning, although there were exceptions. For a migrant teacher like myself who was very knowledgeable in LOTE Indonesian, to operate in the lowly motivated LOTE environment was invariably very frustrating and disempowering. The high turnover rate of LOTE practitioners in WA Government schools might be indicative of the disempowerment experienced by LOTE teachers. By the time I left my last teaching position in Parkview Senior High School in Dec. 2006 after two years of part-time service, I was informed that I was the longest serving LOTE teacher of the school!

SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY

As a part-time LOTE teacher in Parkview Senior High School in 2005-6, I was given an opportunity to do relief teaching in the school. It was during one of the Agriculture Science lessons that I supervised a group of Year 10 students being taught the skill of fencing at a cattle yard by an agriculture instructor. The conversation I had with them was enlightening as they revealed their perception about school learning. It was a frank and honest expression of their feelings about their school experience. Although there were about 15 students in the outdoor class, three boys (Ric, Marc and Dan) in particular were expressive of their opinion while the rest expressed support for what they were saying by uttering occasional words such as 'yeah', 'oh yes', or 'that's right'. The following is a record of the conversion I had with the students.

Ric: Sir, we are outside the class. Can we talk man to man?

Me: Ok, so what do you want to talk about?

Ric: The school suks! That's why we create lots of trouble for teachers. You know that woman teacher who teaches us English. We give her hell in class. We love to see her getting angry.

Me: That's not very nice of you guys...bullying woman.

Marc: Our heads all got f..k in the class⁷. That's why we are creating trouble for teachers in class.

Me: Hey Marc, this is still a lesson like any other lesson. No foul language, ok.

Marc: Sorry Sir, I got carried away while outside. We can't wait to get outside doing what we are doing now.

Dan: Yeah. I hate classroom. It's for the soft and brainy lot. We're the rough and tough lot and can't wait for the end of the year.⁸

⁷ Not sure what he means but it cannot be something good.

⁸ Leaving school at the end of Year 10.

Marc: I'm definitely leaving the school and going to TAFE to do a course in agriculture. See Sir, that's what we like to do. Why bother with classroom?

Me: Well, wherever you go and do in the future, you still need English, Mathematics to help you in getting where you want to go.

Ric: No Sir, not that kind of English or Maths we got in the classroom.

Reflecting on this conversation with that group of Year 10 students, it appears that they perceived themselves as not being 'brainy' enough to be classroom material. They seemed to suggest that they were trapped in the system and were thus in an 'unfree' state of existence which gave rise to their low academic motivation which, in turn, resulted in them creating discipline problems for teachers in the class. More seriously, they appeared to suggest that nature instead of nurture was the determinant of their life and that no amount of academic hard work would change this reality. The alternative, therefore, was a life 'outside' the classroom. This shared perception is in direct contrast with the perception of many Asian students, and especially with mine, as we Asian generally believe that students can achieve anything through hard work – a belief that one's natural ability plays very little part in the success of a person.

MY FIRST RELIEF LESSON

Ever since I recommenced my teaching career in this country in 2002, I had little positive to mention about my teaching experience until the incident in 2004 when I was contracted to teach on a part-time basis at Park View Senior High School. The incident shifted my perception of collegial support when it comes to handling discipline cases. This incident occurred during my very first relief lesson in this country with the Remedial Extension Class of Park View Senior High School. The following is a narrative of the incident which involved the School Principal.

With the expectation of a normal remedial class which I was trained for years ago, I expected the students to be less able in terms of learning ability but reasonably

well behaved. But as I entered the class of about 12, I noticed that more than half of the class was sitting on the table talking, some were drawing on the board and others were literally shouting at each other. My entrance into the class appeared to have little impact as they continued with their behaviour pattern regardless. With much effort, I managed to get them into their seats. My heart pounded as I expected trouble. Before I could finish distributing colour pencils for them to finish their colouring project left behind by their teacher, two tables were already pushed over and two students were deeply entangled on the floor in a fight with both of them using pencils stabbing into each other's backs. Seeing the incident unfolding in front of me, I was terrified and unable to take any action for fear of being accused of touching the students – a principle which I had till then followed strictly without exception when I dealt with students. However, the gravity of the situation propelled me to physically separate them while asking another student to go to the office to seek assistance. By then half of the class had absconded. I had great difficulty in separating the two Year 9 boys until someone came in the class. To my great surprise, it was neither the Deputy Principal nor the Student Discipline Coordinator of the school that appeared, but it was the School Principal himself. Without hesitation, he grabbed the bigger boy while I held onto the smaller boy and separated him from the tangle. As they were big boys, with one of them bigger and taller than me, we had a hard time to keep them separated and calm them down. The Principal had to 'rugby tackle' the bigger boy and push him into a corner to calm him down. This was an incident reminiscent of a demolition job in the demountable where tables and chairs were turned upside down and one of the windows shattered as the bigger boy struggled with the Principal. The struggle lasted for about half an hour before we managed to calm them down. While I escorted the smaller boy to the Discipline Coordinator's Office, the bigger boy was sent to the Deputy Principal to be dealt with by the Principal. Handing over the boy to the Discipline Coordinator was a great relief to me and I was glad that the whole incident was over. However, a feeling of unease began to arise immediately as I left the Coordinator's Office. The feeling could be worse than the incident itself as I expected a 'lecture' or proper dressing down by

the Principal for losing control of the students in the class. The feeling turned to fear as I walked along the corridor while the Principal was walking towards me. I thought the best I could do was to apologize for what had happened in the relief lesson. As he approached and stopped in front of me, I was expecting an outburst from him as I experienced with the HOLA in the previous school I taught. However,

Principal: Are you alright Geoff? (with a concerned tone of voice).

Me: I... I... (trying to gather my speech). I am OK. I am really sorry...

Principal: No... No... No... Don't say sorry! You don't need to apologize for what happened just then. The Deputy should have warned you about the class before he put you there.

Me: But...

Principal: No... No... don't worry. You know we could do with a little bit of excitement otherwise our life here would be very dull.

Me: I don't know what to say but thank you for your understanding.

Principal: Don't mention it. See you later.

As we walked away in different directions, the original feeling of guilt and fear dissipated totally and a sense of composure returned. I felt as if an unbearable load had come off my shoulders. The Principal's humorous words of consolation were perception changing. I certainly realized that there was support and understanding out there when I failed to manage the students' discipline. The Principal had been my inspiration to continue teaching in this very 'challenging' school until he was taken ill and retired a year later. His departure from the school also marked the end of my teaching at the school in December 2005.

The incident during my first relief lesson represented the worst of my failure in student discipline control. However, the few consoling words from the Principal had gone a long way in reassuring me that there was support available. It was not all blame. The Principal reminded me of my high school principal, of his caring and concerning nature for the teachers and the students of the school. Despite the daily challenges of managing difficult classes, the words of the Principal had been empowering and uplifting. This country could do with more Principals and Deputy Principals like him.

He had not only devoted his whole life to educating the young, but had been an inspiration to many teachers in the school.

MAKING SENSE

Several years have gone by since I lived through these critical incidents. But they still generated emotions which are mostly negative as I recounted them over the past few months. Nevertheless, the recounting also brought about a time of self-reflection on the background to the incidents. This is indeed a time of ‘healing’ of the wound that my passion for educating the young had suffered over the years. It could also be a time of enlightenment towards emancipation from the feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy I have experienced as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA. If this research study can help me to ‘rediscover’ and renew myself, to enable me to regain my passion to teach, then it would be most significant for me personally, and perhaps also for those Asian migrant teachers who are going through or have gone through similar experiences to mine.

The recounting of the critical incidents has generated an awareness in me that my passion to educate the young has been firmly grounded in my cultural background, the socially generated universal truths, my educational experience as a student and my success stories. All these background elements have served to piece together a mindset that has moulded an expectation in me about parental support, student work ethic and behaviour, teachers’ behaviour and the school as an institution for nurturing the young. When these expectations failed to materialize, feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy began to set in. My passion to teach began to experience a slippery slope down. My expectation as a teacher had been reduced to enforcing school regulations under the shadow of the parents and the school administrators. A remark by the Deputy in my first job placement briefing, “If you can help them to learn something, it would be a bonus,” appeared to accurately portray my role as a teacher.

This study has also generated an awareness in me that there is a dissonance between my expectations and the school environment in this country. This awareness should have dampened my passion to continue teaching but it has re-energized me. In

addition, despite my extreme reluctance to 'let go' of my positivist upbringing and allegiance to positivist epistemology, Peter and Lily who are my dedicated mentors in this study, have been my primary sources of inspiration and encouragement in moving me on to a journey of self discovery and learning. I believe there is nothing more important and significant than a study that could bring about a life changing experience for those who engage in it or participate in it. After all, the very fundamental principle of any education course is the education of the person who undertakes it. Based on this belief, the recounting of my lived experience was used as the foundation for my critical self-reflection and a base for my research participants to reflect on their lived experiences as Asian migrant teachers in WA in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER 5

Lived Experiences of Asian Migrant Teachers

OVERVIEW

An overarching goal of this research is to reach out to two primary audiences in order to relive my life events emotionally with me (Richardson, 2000). These include (1) other Asian migrant teachers and (2) the general public. By sharing my lived experience and my interpretation of critical incidents with other Asian migrant teachers, I intended to understand empathically how they felt about being Asian migrant school practitioners in this country. This chapter contains a description of the lived experiences of these three migrant teachers of Asian background who served as the participants of this research study. Their recounting and reflections were facilitated by sharing my own lived experiences with them (see Chapter 4) in semi-structured interviews and informal discussions. The recounting and reflections of their lived experience, in particular critical incidents, is followed by my interpretation and sense-making of the discussion. These accounts are compared and contrasted to reveal differences and similarities amongst our experiences as Asian migrant school practitioners practising in our respective school settings in WA.

PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

In terms of country of origin, the three participants, like me, were born and brought up in Southeast Asian countries. One of them, again like me, gained her teaching qualifications from a tertiary institution in the United Kingdom whereas the other two obtained their teaching qualifications in their respective home countries. All of us began our teaching career in our respective home countries. Our teaching experiences range from ten to twenty years. All of us migrated to WA from our home countries with our children in the 1990's with the exception of Hueh who migrated to WA in early 2000.

In terms of their current teaching status, all three participants are still teaching in different government schools in WA. In order to ensure strict confidentiality, the names of the participants, their home countries and the schools they served are pseudonyms, and although the female gender is used it does not necessarily correspond with each participant's true gender.

HUEH'S EXPERIENCES I

Hueh is in her late 40's. She taught in her home country for about 15 years and is now teaching Mathematics in a government school in WA. She began teaching in WA in 2008 and was a teacher assistant prior to that. I met her in the middle of 2008 in the school in which I had taught earlier in 2004 and 2005. At that stage, she had been teaching Mathematics in the school for about six months.

Although I was familiar with the school surroundings and some of the staff members, I had to follow the normal protocol as a visitor to the school. I entered the reception and was seated there until Hueh turned up to meet me and took me into the Math Department Office which I used to frequent when I was a teacher at the school. Although she was eager to head for home for her children, she was very accommodating and willing to relate her lived experience as a school practitioner.

Me: How's teaching in this school?

Hueh: Oh, it's great but it can be very challenging especially with the Year 10 classes. They can be a bit of headache! But I have great support from my HOLA (Head of Learning Area). He has been a great help to me especially with problem kids.

Me: I know it's not easy to teach in this school because I taught here before.

Hueh: Oh, when did you teach here? What did you teach?

Me: I taught LOTE (Language Other Than English) Indonesian back in 2004 and 2005. It can be challenging for us as Asians teaching in this school. How do you find yourself?

Hueh: Well, maybe we speak different accents but to me I think low motivation is the main reason for the poor performance and discipline.

Me: I had similar problem when I taught Indonesian. Sometimes students complained about my accent but most of the time they were just making excuses for not doing their work. What do you think?

Hueh: Ya. I think they are very bored in class and would give any reasons for not doing their work.

Me: So how do you deal with that?

Hueh: There isn't much I can do. The Year 10s are waiting to get out of school and a lot of them don't bother to turn up for classes even they're in school. That's makes it even harder for them to catch up when they do turn up. I just have to try my best to cope with the problem.

Me: I can understand that. You know when I was asked to take over a class of Agriculture Science students for a few days, I had the similar experience. The kids were just not interested in classroom work. They were happy when they were outside the classroom doing manual activities such as fencing – with 'no stress' as they commented. Most of them I spoke to just wanted the school term to end so that they could get out of school as soon as possible!

Hueh: So you had the same experience before.

Me: Of course. How's this different from the country you come from?

Hueh: There is no such thing! Everyone in my country would take every opportunity to be in class and learn as much as they can because they know education is the way to their good future. You don't have students who wouldn't come to school or wouldn't do their homework. Here, if you give them homework, they would complain and will not do it anyway. So I've given up giving them homework.

Me: How's their attitude towards Maths? Surely it is better than LOTE?

Hueh: I think like in any other subjects, the poor students especially are just not interested. They just like to play and muck around in class. See, we have four streams of Maths in this school, most students would choose the

easiest stream if you allow them to do so. I am surprised even the good kids have the same attitude as well. They have little motivation to do the best for themselves no matter what we tell them about the importance of Maths in their lives. They just won't listen and go their own way. It is very frustrating and sad to know that the school has such good facilities to help them to learn and the teachers work so hard for them and yet they just couldn't care less about it.

Me: What would you suggest to help to improve students' motivation?

Hueh: I think the students need to be challenged to aim higher. Give them more challenging tasks to do instead of offering them choices of different streams of Maths. We don't give students any choice in my country like when we were in our school days. We need to find alternative teaching methods to motivate the students. Teachers need more training in order to cope with the low motivation of the kids.

Me: I know you have to go home, so I better let you go. Thank you very much for your time.

Hueh: That's ok. See you soon.

Although the first formal discussion session with Hueh lasted only for about half an hour, it evoked a range of feelings of 'common' sorrow. The mentioning of the HOLA's support in the handling of difficult children sent a chill down my spine as I recalled the promise of my HOLA at another school of his 'undying' support in the management of difficult students in 2003. Although Hueh did not have the same experience as me with my HOLA, her contract at the school was not extended at the end of 2008. The 'support' she received from the HOLA might perhaps have been the same technique that my HOLA used to assess her ability to handle difficult students? As Hueh came from a similar background to mine, she had expected a similar standard of students' discipline as I had done. Had she perhaps referred one too many difficult students to her HOLA for attention?

Hueh's experiences with her Year 10 Maths classes were not too dissimilar from my Agriculture Science lesson where students were eager to leave the classroom for the

‘real world’, although nothing was mentioned about the concept of the classroom as being for the ‘brainy’.

My experience with LOTE teaching was that students were negative in learning another language – the ‘why bother’ attitude. In the discussion I had with Hueh, it appeared that students had a similar attitude towards Maths. She informed me that her effort in justifying the importance of Maths for their future had gone mostly unheeded - the students appeared to opt for the easiest option available. In the case of learning LOTE, it was not the easiest learning path that the students were looking for but stopping their learning of LOTE if they had their way, and their parents appeared to have little concern about it. It would be interesting to find out if the parents have the same attitude about Maths.

Reflecting on my own experience and that of Hueh, a consensus appears to emerge, that is, poor performance and discipline are frequently associated with the low ability learners. We perceive that this is associated with low motivation in classroom learning. The problem, in our opinion, could be addressed through specific and targeted professional training of teachers where exploring new approaches to teaching is the priority concern. We have the consensus that students need to be challenged more in order to better prepare them for their adult life.

HUEH’S EXPERIENCES II

Following the introductory discussion session, I had a series of informal contacts with Hueh through telephone conversations aimed primarily at gathering additional information, seeking clarification of information gathered and generating interpretation. Above all, these contacts were aimed at establishing a closer professional relationship with her. She had since been appointed to another school for a fixed term of nine months. Since she was then serving in a less ‘challenging’ senior high school along the coast, that is, a school with less discipline problems, I felt it would be interesting to find out about her teaching experience in a different school. A discussion/interview session was organized at a public library. However, before I undertook to find out about her teaching experience in a different school, I was curious to find out her reasons for

becoming a teacher assistant before becoming a teacher. The following is a record of our discussion.

Me: Thank you very much for meeting me again.

Hueh: That's OK. I'm happy if I can help.

Me: How's your day?

Hueh: A little bit hectic because it's our reporting time.

Me: I guess you have to go home to do your cooking and washing, so we better get started.

Hueh: Ya. Ok.

Me: Before we talk about your experience in the present school, I would like to talk to you about something we spoke about over the phone the other day. I want to know why you took the job as a Teacher Assistant before becoming a teacher, after all you are a very experienced High School Maths teacher back home.

Hueh: Well, when I arrived in this country, I was told by our relatives who have lived here for many years and my husband that it is hard to teach here as our accents are different. They all told me that I would not get any respect from the students and parents.

Me: So what did you do?

Hueh: Well, for an educated person, it is not nice to have nothing to do, so I took up Accountancy and started a small business and did a lot of other things.

Me: So you had given up your idea of teaching then?

Hueh: No. Not at all! In fact, all the while, I was thinking of going back to teach, but my children were young and nobody was looking after them, so I couldn't go back to teach.

Me: How did you come to be a Teacher Assistant (TA)?

Hueh: Well, a family friend of ours is a Teacher Assistant. She said since I am so keen to teach, why don't I consider a TA job. So I listened to her and applied, applied and applied for the third time and finally, I got the job in

a primary school. I was very happy because I was then back in school and I helped the school with translation and helping the school in dealing with parents who can't speak English very well.

Me: How did you become a teacher then?

Hueh: Well, while I was working as a TA with an ESL teacher, she told me that many other migrant teachers have become teachers in this country. Since I am a qualified teacher, I should apply to become one. So I applied to do a refresher course and became a teacher last year. I was very happy then because I could teach the students Maths again in tandem with another Australian teacher. I found out that the good kids could understand me very well and I could teach very well. But the bad ones always created trouble and made excuses not to work.

Reflecting on Hueh's story, one could not stop from being amazed at her determination to continue her career as a teacher despite all the hurdles she had to negotiate. Similar to my belief in the universal truth concerning one's career (see Chapter 3), Hueh's determination to become a teacher in this country appears to have been driven by a similar belief about education. In this regard, teaching is not only an honour to oneself as an educated person, that is, personal pride, but it is also a way of showing concern for the young in a collectivist cultural framework. My attitude, perhaps, that of Hueh as well, is one of inborn inclination towards nurturing the young instead of financial reward as the primary objective for I know there are many more and better opportunities of gaining wealth apart from teaching.

Hueh's description of her initial barrier to teaching in this country was also indicative of the collectivist Asian culture where personal decision is subservient to collective and family imperatives. One of the most influential variables in her decision to continue teaching in this country appears to be that of her relatives and her husband. Together with her sense of priority concern for her children, she opted for other 'opportunities' instead of her chosen career. However, the urge to fulfill her ambition as an educated person and a teacher propelled her back to teaching through the route of a teacher assistant – a route that appears to be not uncommon among migrant teachers.

HUEH'S STORY III

Following the description of her experience of becoming a teacher in this country, my attention turned to her teaching experience in this country in another school.

Me: I understand that you've been posted to another school, Seaview Senior High School.

Hueh: Yes. Just for about nine months.

Me: I remember I taught in the school way back as a relief teacher in the early 90's. How do you find the school? It should be much better than Hillview Senior High School you taught last year?

Hueh: Well, students' discipline there is better but not in other aspects.

Me: Are there any incidents that you would like to talk about?

Hueh: Yes, there was one incident about a parent. The incident was like this. There was one very destructive Year 8 Aboriginal boy in my class and it ended up with a meeting between me, my HOLA and a Deputy Principal. During the meeting, the parent complained that her son can't understand me because of my accent. That's why he was bored in class so not paying attention and couldn't learn properly. He was in Course 3 Maths, you know, that's for the low ability kids. During the meeting, she even pointed to my HOLA and said that his son had no problem of understanding him. Thus, in order to solve the problem, a decision was made to transfer him to my HOLA's class for Maths. I was really depressed because of that. I felt I had failed to live up to a good teacher. But you know what?

Me: What?

Hueh: Only after two days, the boy asked to come back to my class because my HOLA made him do a lot of work and he couldn't take it. His parent was then informed of his request and the Deputy put him back in my class and from then on he tried to do his work and became less destructive in class.

Me: Reflecting on the incident, what is your feeling?

Hueh: Well, at the beginning I felt very depressed, feeling that I had failed to be a good teacher. However, later I realized that it was the boy's parent that had failed him for not supporting the teacher and the school. She just listened to her son without finding out what was actually happening in the school.

Me: Well to tell you the truth I had almost the exact experience with a boy who was accusing me of calling name, 'Justine' instead of 'Justin' as he is a boy. His mother complained to my HOLA and the School Deputy that I had been calling him names and he was very upset and didn't want to come to school. She also complained about my accent and wanted me to be sacked from the school. It ended up with a meeting with the boy's father who then apologized after he had found out what happened exactly.

Hueh: Look's like we are getting very little support from parents although all of us are working hard to help their children to learn in school. It's very different from parents in our countries back home.

Me: Yes, no doubt about that. I would be punished by my parents first if there is any incident in the school regardless whether I am on the right or wrong.

Hueh: I think we all were brought up that way.

Me: What about the staff of the school? Do you experience any difficulty with them?

Hueh: We have 11 staff in the Maths Department. I think they are not very supportive as compared to those at Hillview. There is one particular lady teacher in the Department I feel she is a bit of a racist. She has been very impolite to me.

Me: In what ways?

Hueh: Well, you know I am 48 and she is at least 15 to 20 years younger than me. When I first arrived at the school, she appeared to be nice and helpful to me because she told me that I could send any bad students to

her class at anytime in the 'buddy class' system. One day, I sent four students to two different buddy classes. Two were sent to her class. You know, after I gave my class some work, I went to check, that is, about five minutes later but I found them wandering around the corridor outside her classroom. When I asked them why they were not in the 'buddy class', they told me that they were asked to go away. I thought the students were lying, so I brought them to her class myself this time. When I arrived at her class, without a word, she just ordered the two students to go to two different classes without greeting or saying anything to me. I felt very embarrassed and disappointed.

On another day, she came into my classroom while I was teaching. Without letting me know or saying anything, she just went on speaking to my students about their work with her. After she had talked to the students, she just walked out without saying a word to me. She treated me as if I was nobody or not in existence. She is really very impolite.

Me: How do you feel?

Hueh: You know I am much older than her and I expected some respect from her. Maybe that's the way their culture is, I don't know. I just feel that she is very impolite to me.

Me: Is there any other incident about her?

Hueh: Yes, she now thinks that she can come in and out of my classroom as she likes without asking for my permission. You know, my classroom has two doors. One day, she just walked in one and out the other. That was really annoying because she disturbed my class while I was teaching. Now she is getting even worst. She now even comes in one door and out the other door and few minutes later comes back other door and out the front door. It's really annoying. Not only that, at one time while I was teaching, she just came to my class and went to the back of the class and picked up a book and read by herself without talking to me. After she finished reading she just went out without saying a word to me. She also

has the habit of coming to my class during the recess to look at the work I have done with class on the board even though I am still in the classroom. I feel that she was checking on me. I feel really annoyed and frustrated because she had been very impolite to me. I feel that as educated people we should not be behaving like this.

Me: Have you spoken to your HOLA?

Hueh: I don't know how he would react to my complaint... maybe later.

Me: I can understand that. Once I had my HOLA who walked into my class and shouted at my students without asking for permission and refused to give any proper explanation when I confronted him later on for his outburst in my class. My kids were working well then. You would expect these (educated) people to be more polite but unfortunately lots of them have degraded themselves as educated professionals.

Hueh: Ya. Sometimes it's hard for us to imagine. Maybe it's their culture or they are bit of racist because I don't see them treating their own people that way or they don't dare to do it to their own people or maybe I haven't seen them doing that to their own people.

Me: Well, I am not really sure what's the reason, but I can see that it's a case of bullying just like the bad kids in school doing it to other kids in the school yard.

Hueh: Maybe but this is very demoralizing and frustrating.

Me: Well I can understand that. Do you have any other similar incident like this in the school?

Hueh: Eh, I think there was another incident about a month ago. It happened when I brought my students to join another two classes in the Maths Lab. It was on an inter-school sports day when most students had gone to sports. I had four students left to look after, so I went to the Maths Lab and found out that the Lab which was booked earlier by another teacher but all his students had gone for the sports. So no one was using the Lab. I asked the teacher in-charge of the Lab permission to use the lab to which he agreed. So I returned to the class to bring the four students to

the lab. On the way to my class, I informed the other two classes that they could bring the kids to the lab to use the computers as the students who suppose to use the Lab have all gone to sports. I went to my class and marked the student roll and brought my four kids to the Lab. When I arrived at the lab I was asked to bring my kids somewhere else even though there were more than four computers left in the Lab. I just couldn't, just couldn't believe how ungrateful these teachers were. I was the one who informed them of the empty Maths Lab and yet I was told to go somewhere else by them.

Me: Ow, that's really unbelievable! What did you do then?

Hueh: I don't one to argue with them in front of the kids especially. I just brought my kids to the library and the library staff were happy to let my four kids to use the computers in the library. You know, I have not come across such ungrateful people, and they are educated professionals and they are teachers and my colleagues. I wonder what they teach the kids and how they treat the kids in their classes. Unbelievable!

Me: Sometimes, I feel the same way. They look after their own people. My experience is with my relief teaching. When I arrive at a school, I can see that my name is always at the bottom of the list. I think I am always amongst the last to be called for relief work. My feeling is that they would call me only there is no body else to call upon for relief. Even though I have been called frequently to one school to do relief, it is usually for ICT which I believe hard to find relief for. Apart from ICT relief, I am rarely called to do relief in the school.

Hueh: Well, I think that's how they see us Asian teachers. Sometimes, I feel sad and frustrated as I have so much to offer and yet being treated like this and shown very little respect. It is bad enough for kids to be disrespectful, but for the teachers, the educated professionals who are our colleagues to show disrespect for other teachers is unbelievable. I tried so hard to help the kids but people are so ungrateful and disrespectful.

Me: It's sad and frustrating especially when you know there isn't much we can do about it.

Hueh's experience was alarmingly similar to mine. In terms of her experience with parents, the incident bears close similarity with my experience. In both cases, the parents, both mothers, attributed their children's difficulty to staying focused and learning in class and thus their poor behaviour to our accents as Asian migrant practitioners. However, from our experiences, particularly with my experience with an Irish accent (see Chapter 4), we feel that these parents may have resorted to the easiest and most convenient attribution of their children's problems in school, that is, to our racial background – someone different from them and thus a convenient scapegoat for their problems. They did not seem to be able to see beyond their immediate cultural boundary in the understanding of their children's learning difficulty in school. Perhaps, they had failed to realize or were unaware of the dedication of Asian migrant school practitioners – most of whom have been encultured in the imperative of providing a decent education for their children. They have gone through years of indoctrination and enculturing, like me, about the importance of school education in one's life. The apparent oversight and disregard by these parents for our dedication to the education of their children has been a source of constant frustration of our efforts in helping the children to learn in school. The way some parents treated us has unconsciously contributed towards piecing together an unhealthy mental picture in us about parents in this country. Instead of supporting the teachers in educating their own children, in our minds, some parents are 'fault finders' without making any effort to understand the issues related to their children's behaviour and learning. Being practitioners from a different racial background, we seem to have become the 'soft' and convenient target of complaints. Considering our dedication to our profession as school practitioners, our common feeling is one of parental ungratefulness which has become a common cause of frustration and disempowerment.

In terms of collegiality, our experiences are not too dissimilar although my experience of frustration and disempowerment was with my HOLA while Hueh's experience was with her colleagues. In both cases, the virtue of respect amongst

educated, professional teachers appears to be the exception rather than the norm. Hueh experienced frequent intrusion by a female teacher into her class for no obvious reasons other than those of an apparent negative intent to cause distress and intimidation while I experienced a similar intrusion by my HOLA into my class for a reason that had little need or justification. We attributed these incidents to colleagues being disrespectful, insulting and unethical in their professional relationships.

The incidents of seemingly unwarranted and disrespectful intrusion into our classroom spaces were particularly hurtful at a time when we were looking to colleagues for support while operating as ‘guest’ professionals. We longed for the locals to help us in our understanding of the local culture, beliefs and practices to enable us to ‘settle’ in readily. Instead, these colleagues’ actions caused us grief and contributed to our mystification while we were trying to contribute something towards the common good of this society. Hueh’s experience of the two male teachers in her school had been regarded as an example of colleagues who are not only ungrateful but who also add to the grief and mystification of those who are trying to survive in a difficult environment. Most distressing and disempowering of all, however, would have to be our assumption, true or false, that there is little we could do about it. We feel that, little by little, we are being encultured into the disrespectful attitudes and practices of the locals which unfortunately may be the ultimate stance we might have to adopt in order to ‘free’ ourselves from the trauma of being teachers in this country. In the event, we would have to sacrifice our own cultural values, beliefs and attitudes towards the education of the young – a cost, I believe, that would be too high to pay. To compromise at times may be good, however, to compromise our good for the seemingly bad, as illustrated in the incidents we experienced, just to enable us to fit in with the contemporary trend would not be ethical.

Despite these gloomy incidents we have retained a degree of hope. In times of parental verbal abuse and insult, Hueh’s HOLA was willing to step in to help out by moving the disruptive student to his class. While she was refused entry into the Maths Lab with her four students, the library staff welcomed her with open arms. In my experience, in times of extreme pressure and feeling of inefficacy, my School Principal managed to crack an unlikely joke to shrug off the incident. These positive incidents,

though considered minor, have contributed significantly towards the restoration of our confidence in collegial support in times of need.

TENG'S STORY

Teng is in her early 50's and originated from another Southeast Asian country with the same ethnic background as Hueh. She gained her tertiary teaching qualification in the United Kingdom and taught in her home country upon graduation for about ten years before she migrated to WA in the early 1990's. Since the late 1990's, she had been teaching in various Government schools in WA in the areas of foreign languages (LOTE).

As Teng and I recounted and reflected on our lived experiences as school practitioners in WA schools, we concluded that, apart from the students, two groups of people that impacted greatly on us were parents and our colleagues. Their support and respect, or lack of it, appears to be the most significant contributing factors towards our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as Asian migrant teachers.

Me: Thank you for participating in my research.

Teng: You're most welcome. I'm happy to help out.

Me: You understand that my research is about your experience as an Asian Migrant teacher.

Teng: Yes. I have read the information sheet about your research. I am happy to tell you some of my experiences as a teacher in different Government schools in Perth.

Me: We will be talking about parents and later on, the Admin and colleagues. If you have other things to say, I will be very happy to listen.

Teng: What are you referring to when you say about the Admin.

Me: Oh, sorry. I mean the School Principals, Deputy Principals and other Admin Staff you came across so far in your teaching experience in this country.

Teng: Ok. So what you do want to know about my experience?

- Me:* Can you recall some of the incidents you had with the parents?
- Teng:* Yes. I had quite a few incidents with parents and most of them were not really pleasant.
- Me:* Can you describe some of these incidents with the parents.
- Teng:* Eh... Ya. I think one of the most serious one would have to be an incident involving a parent who was not happy about the way I dealt with her son. I think it was back in early 2007 when I had a stern word with one of the most disruptive boys in the school. He was well known in the school for poor behaviour and a constant visitor to the Deputy Principal's office. One day when he entered my class, instead of going to his allocated seat, he went around the class and disturbed other students by his usual antics of taking things from other students and throwing them back. He was generally annoying other students in the class. After I gave him warning, he sat down but remained restless - turning around trying to get the attention of other students. Although I had started teaching, he still wanted to talk and disrupt other students. I gave him another two or three warnings later on but he continued with his disruptive behaviour. I admit I was quite angry as he just won't let me get on with the lesson without further disruption, so I walked up to him and looked at him and told him off. Only then he settled down a bit and I was able to continue my teaching.
- Me:* So what happened next?
- Teng:* I think the boy went home and told his mother about the incident and she complained to my Deputy Principal that I had threatened her son. I was informed of the complaint by the Deputy and he informed me that the parent wanted to see me with him the following day. I felt really depressed as I was trying to teach without been constantly disrupted by one student, and yet the parent of the student complained me of threatening her son. Early the next day, I was called to the Deputy's office and he gave me a briefing of what to expect in the meeting to come. One thing I could recall very well is that the Deputy reminded me several

times to be professional, in his words, 'we are professional people, we have to be professional at all times'. Not only that his words were comforting but more importantly, he was trying to tell me that the parent that I was about to confront with would be 'unprofessional' or simply rude or had little respect for teachers. My guess was unfortunately correct as the parent was shown into our school conference room where we sat waiting by our School Registrar. The parent, a middle age woman, not particularly well groomed entered into the room with her son and a daughter in tow, with long faces. As her daughter, a lovely student of mine greeted me with a big smile and wanted to approach me as she usually did, she stretched out her arm and pulled her back to her with a such a force that I could see it was hurting her. The poor little girl had no idea what was going on. Before I could greet the girl, her mother uttered, 'you are not touching my child!' With the rude introduction, she sat down and holding her two children in her two arms, and started scolding me loudly in front of her children and the Deputy. As she was almost at the top of her voice and went on so fast, I could hardly make out what she was saying. What I could make out was that I had been unprofessional, not doing a proper job. Her facial expression especially with her screwed up eyes, looked unbelievably mean and rude. I tried very hard to explain what had happened about her son the day before, but I had no chance to do so as she just went on and on and on scolding me of threatening her son and being unprofessional. She bragged that she had lots and lots of experiences in the schools and told us how to teach and treat children. I was really shaken at the time and didn't know how to respond. I had little chance anyway. I guess that's what the Deputy was saying, 'be professional' before the meeting. After about ten minutes of lecturing me, she turned her attention to the Deputy and lectured him similarly of how he should run the school and deal with his subordinates. She accused the Deputy of being negligent in his duties in dealing with the school staff. What I could hear from her while she was

lecturing the Deputy was, you should... you should..., you should do this do that and so on. You know, she was a real psycho!

Me: Well how did you manage to get out of the meeting?

Teng: Thank goodness. I was saved by the bell. The siren sounded while she was still lecturing the Deputy how to run the school. The Deputy asked me to leave for my first lesson. That's the last I heard from her.

Me: It must be a great relief to you.

Teng: You bet.

Me: Was there anything else about the incident?

Teng: As I said, it was the last I heard from her. Although she continued talking to the Deputy, I don't know what's followed. The Deputy did not say anything about it. I just forget about it.

Me: How do you feel about the whole incident?

Teng: Well, one thing I failed to comprehend is how could a parent scold a teacher and a School Deputy Principal like that especially in front of her kids. No wonder her kid behaved so poorly in class. She encouraged him to do so as he knew mummy would support him if he got into trouble with teacher or school. Not only that she showed no respect for teachers and school, she also failed to show a good example in front of her children. So how could her children behave and learn well in school? They would just grow up like her and the problem continues. We tried so hard to discipline the children so that they could learn. Not only they don't appreciate that, they come to school and lecture us. This kind of people are really ungrateful considering we are here trying to help their own children to learn and for them to have a better future.

Me: Anything else you want to mention about this incident?

Teng: Ya. Reflecting on the incident, I was really grateful to the Deputy for his warning before the meeting of what to expect. I guess as a professional person, he would not go into the detail about how the parent would behave but just reminded me, not once but several times before the meeting to be 'professional' and keep calm during the meeting. It was

fortunate that he briefed me before-hand, otherwise, I would be totally shocked. Somehow he had shielded me from the impact of the parent's verbal abuse so that I don't feel that bad. I was truly grateful to him.

Teng's experience with the parent recounted in the incident above was almost the exact replica of that of Heuh's experience. A conclusion that can be drawn from the two incidents is that the parents had been disrespectful of teachers as professionals who are trying hard to help their own children to learn in school so that they could have a better future. They had failed to show good examples for their children to emulate and thus, 'evil will continue to breed evil'. In both incidents, teachers felt a sense of disempowerment and inefficacy as their effort of educating the young had been frustrated by the lack of support from the parents. These incidents also bore remarkable resemblance with my own experience with a parent about 'name calling' (see Chapter 4). However, I was more fortunate as I did not experience the face to face confrontation with the parent but with the husband who was apologetic after knowing the real issue behind the incident.

Amidst the demoralizing experiences, the collegial support from School Deputies had gone a long way to restore some of the confidence of my research participants in their teaching careers in this country. Though it may appear to be insignificant, support given at the right time was greatly appreciated and was deemed by them as morale restoring support. It helped to restore the teachers' self confidence to continue with their chosen career in an environment loaded with dissonant values, beliefs and practice compared with their own.

Continuing with the theme of her relationship with colleagues, I asked Teng about her experiences with school principals, other deputy principals or colleagues other than the ones cited already. While the Deputy cited in the previous incident was supportive in dealing with the parents, other Deputies she came across were not as supportive.

Me: Apart from the incident we discussed about earlier, how do you find other members of the school staff of the schools you have taught over the past few years?

Teng: Most of them are alright to me but I really don't like my present Principal's way of telling me off about professional development courses (PDs).

Me: In what way?

Teng: Well, I always want to improve my teaching especially in class behaviour management. So I always want to go for professional development courses to do with behaviour management. You know what, my present Principal, though very nice to me most of the time, she is very upfront and public about PDs. She always tells me in public whenever there is a PD that I am interested in, in her words, 'You can go, but I am not paying you' or when there is a staff meeting or PD at the beginning of school term, she will always tell me, 'You can come, but I am not paying you'. It is very disappointing to hear as teacher professional development is all to do with money. Teachers would not be able to improve their teaching if they have to foot the cost of their own professional development.

Me: Why is it you have to be paid to go for PD or staff meeting?

Teng: You know I am a part-time teacher, so if the PD or staff meeting falls on my non-teaching days, the school will have to pay me if I attend.

Me: Ok. Now I understand. But it seems odd to me as I was a part-timer as well before. My School Deputies I worked with were always encouraging in getting me to PDs. I was even sent to a different school for two weeks to observe and learn from a very experienced teacher in the past.

Teng: You are lucky. I wish I have the chance to see how other teachers in action particularly in the class control.

Me: Maybe you could ask your school for a chance like that.

Teng: I will try because I am really interested to improve myself in class control. I heard a lot in the different PDs over the years but I have not seen one in action in real life.

Me: How do you feel about the School Deputies?

Teng: Well, the previous School Deputy I worked with, that's the one I told you about has been the best I came across. But the present one is not as good.

Me: Why?

Teng: I really don't like him because of his confronting manner.

Me: How?

Teng: You see, when something goes wrong, he never finds out the reasons beforehand. He always accuses you and lectures you first what I should do or shouldn't do. Sometimes, it could be my fault but he should be more polite and find out things first before accusing people. At one time, he was not happy about me asking the school registrar about my Duties Other Than Teaching (DOTT) payment.

Me: What was it about the DOTT payment?

Teng: You know, I found out from a close colleague that I had been given less amount of DOTT as I suppose to according to my teaching portion. So I went to see him at the beginning of the year about it. We came to an agreement that the school will pay me for the shortfall in my DOTT time allocation. That was about six months ago. Three four months later, I was yet to be paid for the shortfall, so I went to check with the Registrar about it. I believe the Registrar must have gone to check with him about the matter.

Me: What happened then?

Teng: Next thing I remember was he called me to the Front Office, in the presence of the Registrar and other people, he asked, in his words, 'Who told you the school owes you DOTT? Who told you the school has to pay you for the DOTT?' I was shocked to hear this. I had little choice but to tell him in public as well then that we had a meeting about three months ago in his office and he agreed that the school will pay me for the shortfall. Then he calmed down, embarrassed I believe, and said, 'I'll see what I can do'. This was his fault for lecturing me in public! Serve

him right! There were few other occasions he came to my class and lectured me in front of my kids about what I had done wrong and I should do this, do that. It's very insulting when he does that in front of my kids and it's very frustrating. He was also sending wrong messages to the kids. He had been disrespectful and so the kids might think it is Ok to be disrespectful to me and other teachers. He could have called me to his office and spoken to me in private if there is anything wrong with me and so on. Sometimes, I wonder people at my age why I have to put up with this kind of treatment especially when he is at least fifteen years younger than me. If he is looking for a promotion as a young person, he could have done it in a much tactful manner.

Me: You get this kind of people wanting to show off a bit to prop up their ego or image for different motives. I had the similar experience with my high school HOLA at one time when he walked in my class without my permission or any explanation and shouted at my kids. My kids happened to be well behaved during the lesson. I also felt very insulted especially when I confronted him later and being told I could have controlled the class discipline better. What about your colleagues? How do you feel about them?

Teng: Among all the people I worked with over the past several years in the school, I find most of my colleagues were supportive and respectful with the exception of one colleague in my former school.

Me: Can you tell me about her? How did she treat you?

Teng: She was rude and insulting. Lucky I don't have to work with her on regular basis. I only had to work with her when I was asked by my School Deputy to provide DOTT time for other teachers. One day I was asked by the Deputy to relieve her for her DOTT. When I arrived at the entrance of her class, she came out to meet me at the door. I told her the purpose of my visit. Her immediate reaction was, in her words, 'Oh No, you're not coming to my class.' I explained that I was sent by the Deputy. She turned around after having a word with her class for being

chatty and told me, 'Go tell the Deputy, I don't need you in my class.' Then she just left me at the door. I had no choice but to return to the Deputy's office, a little stunned by her reaction and informed the Deputy about her rejection. With indication of disbelief, he sent me away to do my own preparation. I didn't feel that bad at that first instance. I was thinking maybe she doesn't like other teachers to disrupt their routine but surely she could be more polite in sending me away. However, when she did that the second time after a few weeks, I felt really insulted. On that day I was sent again to her class to provide relief for a support teacher who used to assist her. So with some reservation, I went to her class and told her that I was the relief for the support teacher. I could recall vividly at the time, she waved her index finger from one side to the other in between our faces, and said, 'No, No, No, you don't come in my class, I don't need you in my class'. This time I didn't explain anything but just said, 'Ok' and turned around and walked away. Just before I took the first step forward back to the Deputy's office to inform him of her rejection, I turned and noticed her rude hand gesture of 'chiuing' me away like an animal. I felt really insulted. I told my Deputy about the incident. But I didn't hear any action taken against her or apology from her before I left the school. After the second insult, however, I began to ask about the teacher in the school because I wanted to find out what kind of teacher she was. It was during one of those sessions, a migrant teacher from Eastern Europe came to me and told me that she had been treated similarly as I was. I think she was treated worse than me. I think because the school was doing nothing about it, so she wrote a letter to the Education Department to complain about her. A copy of the letter was sent to the School Principal about her and asked me to sign the letter as well. But I just want to forget about the whole thing as I know my fixed term contract was about to end. In any case, I don't think the Education Department could do anything about it as well. I think she is a bit of

racist and the problem has been there long before I arrived at the school and nothing was done about it.

Me: Ow, quite unbelievable isn't it? This kind of people can still operate as a teacher in this country. No wonder, the standard of school discipline is declining.

Reflecting on Teng's lived experience in relation to the Principal, the Deputy and a female colleague, respect appears to be one of her most important values. Public confrontation in matters of disagreement between Teng and her Principal, Deputy and colleague appears to be closely related to the virtue of respect for each other in a collectivity of a school community. The virtue is concerned with mutual respect between members of a social group, respect for authority and respect for people of an older age. Even though the Deputy was younger than her, respect for authority appears to assume a higher priority over age. Thus, she found it awkward to remind the Deputy of his agreement arrived at in an earlier meeting with regard to her DOTT payment. It was lack of respect from her colleague that frustrated and depressed her. Teng also linked respect closely with politeness. Teng was particularly upset by the hand gesture of her colleague and it caused her to question the quality of the teacher in educating the young.

The issues of respect and politeness appear to be the two main values that emerged as critical issues that concerned my research participants. These values are, in fact, my core values. When these values are 'violated' by our superiors, parents and students, we felt not only insulted but, more importantly, it dampened our zeal in our education of the young. A feeling of ungratefulness gradually crept into our minds leading to a sense of frustration and disempowerment, and thus indifference, thereby succumbing to the common escapist stance of, "if you can't beat them, you join them." Although this stance may be contrary to our cherished values as educators, we have little choice if want to continue to operate in the 'established' social environment of educating the young. Within such an environment, the task of educating the young appears to be reminiscent of a business transaction where education becomes a commodity to be bought and sold without much relationship (respect and politeness) between the givers

and the receivers, which in my experience is the culture that some of the schools in WA are moulding.

CHENTU'S STORIES

Chentu comes from Santos, another Southeast Asian country and is in her late 40's. She gained her tertiary teaching qualification in her home country and taught there for about nine years before migrating to WA in 1992. She is now teaching a LOTE language in two WA Government schools. To gauge any similarity and difference between her feelings and perception and ours about teaching in WA as Asian migrant teachers, I conducted a one-hour phone interview with her. Prior to the interview, I visited her at one of the schools she was teaching in and briefed her on her role in the research. The following is a record of our one-hour formal discussion over the telephone.

Me: Hello, can I speak to Chantu?

Chentu: Speaking.

Me: It's me Geoff.

Chentu: Geoff who?

Me: Geoff Law, the research guy.

Chentu: Oh Yes. I was expecting a call from you over the school holidays.

Me: Oh dear. I was expecting you to call me whenever you are available for a chat about your teaching experiences. Sorry about that. Anyway, we are now in contact. When I can have a time to talk with you about your experience?

Chentu: Right now if you want to.

Me: That would be great. Let me get ready with my writing pad and pencils.

Chentu: Ok, where do you want to start?

Me: Good question. Eh... Can we start with your background? Where you come from? What was your teaching experience before you migrated to WA? And why you chose Perth as your destination?

Chentu: Well I came from Santos. I taught Southeast Asian and Ancient History at a High School for about nine years. Job wise, I had a good pay and very happy and satisfied with my teaching job. It was a highly respected profession.

Me: So why did you decide to move to Australia?

Chentu: Although both my husband and I were highly paid, very satisfied with our jobs, my husband worked for an airline, we didn't like our lifestyles. We hardly got to meet each other until late at night everyday when we come in from our work. So we decided to migrate to other countries. We tried Europe, like Germany, and then Australia, like Sydney and Melbourne. Finally, we found Perth as the best place to settle down.

Me: When was that?

Chentu: It was 1992.

Me: So when did you start teaching in WA?

Chentu: I applied to teach with EDWA in 1993 but I didn't teach full-time. I only taught as relief teacher in different schools. It was not until 2003 I started teaching one day a week. In 2006, I started teaching three days a week. In 2007 I did my postgraduate diploma and started teaching full-time in one metropolitan Government Senior High School after my son had gone to primary school.

Me: How do you find teaching in Santos as compared to teaching in WA schools?

Chentu: There are huge differences. Here the standards, particularly in Maths and Science are much lower. The students are much more relax. But they are far less respectful of teachers and teachers have much less say.

Me: What do you think are the reasons?

Chentu: I think they have much more freedom and they have more rights. The parents are much more vocal and daring to speak up against the teachers when they try to discipline their kids. Some of kids have no idea how to respect teachers and they are referred to the office frequently. Teaching

here is just a job with a pay and thus the parents expressed a lot of vulgarity.

Me: Do you have an incident related to student's discipline?

Chentu: Yes. There was this Year 8 boy who had been transferred to the school beginning of term. I was told that he had been kicked out his former school due to disciplinary problem. He was sent to my class on the second day of the term.

Me: What happened on that day?

Chentu: Well, when he arrived in my classroom, he started disrupting other kids in the class and calling out to attract the attention of other kids in the class. When I told him, I have to report him to the HOLA who happened to be the School Discipline Master if he continued with his disruptive behaviour, he stood up and walked out of the class. As he walked out of the class, he grabbed a few pencils and threw them at my face. I couldn't do anything about it but reported to my HOLA who later told me to fill in the incident report. My HOLA later told me to report the incident to my Union Rep in the school which I did because it was violence against teacher. It was the last of I seen or heard of the boy. I gathered from my HOLA later that he was expelled again from the school.

Me: What was your feeling at the time?

Chentu: I was badly shaken, very upset and humiliated in front of my students. I wanted to walk out of the school and never want to come back again. But then the Union Rep consoled me that I was not the only one being abused by the student. Many had similar experience like mine. I found him very consoling, supportive and helpful, so I continued teaching in the school until the end of the year.

Me: Do you have any other experiences with problem kids in the school?

Chentu: No. Although there were few chatty girls, they were harmless. Now I am teaching in primary schools. I have no discipline problems because when I teach, the class teachers are always in the classrooms and they are the ones who usually deal with the problem kids.

Me: Do you experience any difficulty with your colleagues?

Chentu: Not really. Generally, they are OK and supportive.

Me: Judging from your response, apart from the incident of the boy being expelled, you did not encounter much difficulty teaching in this country.

Chentu: It looks that way, but I really don't like some of the attitudes here.

Me: Whose attitudes?

Chentu: Both the parents and the students.

Me: Can you elaborate on that?

Chentu: You see parents here always giving excuses for the misbehaviour of their children. They never admit that their children are misbehaving as if the teachers are always at fault. One of the most common excuses of children not coming to school prepared, forget this, forget that because they have been with their dads or mums because they parents are divorced. It is very frustrating for us as teachers to teach if they do not come prepared.

Me: What else you think the school should do to improve student learning in the school?

Chentu: I think the behaviour management and the rewarding systems do not work in the school. Sending students to 'buddy class', for example, has little effect on the students. In fact they are getting time-off when they are sent to buddy class. In the reward system, I can't understand why the school has to reward students for behaving in the way they suppose to. Apart from rewarding the poorly behaved ones, I always reward the good ones as well for working beyond the expected. I never agree to reward the ones who behaved in the way they suppose to. Some schools never use the reward system as they would spoil the kids. But in the school I teach, I have no choice. I have to follow what everybody does in order to keep the people up there happy.

Me: What do think is the main reason for this reward mentality being cultivated amongst the students?

Chentu: I think it boils down to upbringing and culture. You see, we were taught and instilled with high values concerning our work and responsibilities. We equate reward as a result of hard work and dedication. Here it looks like every small effort the kids put in need to be rewarded. It's just ridiculous how easy life is for the kids here. Kids here are not taught to understand rewards come from hard work rather than 'dropping down from the sky'. In our culture, we are taught to respect, work hard and value honesty. When these virtues are compromised as in the case of our students, we feel frustrated and when nothing is done about it, sooner or later we would have a general sense of despair. It is pleasing to know that our schools have implemented the Virtue Program to help to stop the decline in the basic virtues in the school.

Me: That's good to hear. Anyway, I would not like to keep you any longer. Thank you very much for your time.

Chentu: You are most welcome. If you have any more queries, you can contact me again.

Me: It's very kind of you. Good-bye.

Reflecting on Chentu's stories, comparatively her teaching experience had been less traumatic. Her experience with parents was less dramatic and her line manager was more supportive than ours. But in terms of parents' attitude towards their children's learning, students' attitude towards work, and the school's rewarding mentality, there was little variation from our experiences. Her attribution of these observations was family upbringing and cultural values. These appear to have the greatest influence on the students' attitude and engagement of their energies in school learning.

EMERGENT THEMES

In the analysis of the lived experiences of my three fellow Asian migrant school practitioners, four major issues related to feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy emerged to dominate the description. These include students' learning, parental and

collegial support, and the school administration system. In the case of students' learning, students' work attitude and ethic of 'taking the easiest option', the reward oriented mentality, lack of respect for teachers, and poor discipline appear to be the most disempowering for these teachers. Lack of parental support and respect for teachers are two other major issues that were equally frustrating for them. Lack of respect from their colleagues is another key factor identified that had led to their feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy. The school reward system, though less prominent, is another issue that frustrated them. Despite all the negativities, there were positive perceptions with regard to collegial support, particularly in the cases of Teng and Chentu. In both cases, collegial support was the primary consideration for them to remain in the school where they taught despite the challenging school environments. In general, the analysis has revealed that lack of respect, by way of mistreatment from students, parents, HOLAs and Deputy Principals, appears to be a fundamental issue associated with feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst these Asian migrant teachers, and these feelings were compounded by the feeling that they are powerless in bringing about change and thus have to 'live with it'.

CHAPTER 6

Reflection and Interpretation: A Cultural Perspective

OVERVIEW

Reflecting on my own and my research participants' lived experiences, in this chapter I associate our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy with unresolved cultural differences between our Asian collectivist culture and the seemingly local individualist culture of WA schools. It seems that cultural dissonance can be attributed to the intrusion of the former into the latter, and that this dissonance prevents the development of an effective cross-cultural relationship between the two distinct cultural groups operating within the school context.

INTRODUCTION

This interpretive reflection on the analysis in the preceding chapters of my own and my research participants' lived experiences as Asian migrant school practitioners in different suburban Government schools in WA over the past decades is an attempt to piece together an overall picture that helps to explain our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as school practitioners. Through this so-called 'quilt-making' process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), a picture of cultural dissonance began to emerge as a possible explanation of our feelings. I believe that credible interpretation can be made that the dissonance lies with the difference between our cultural values, beliefs and practices about the education of the young and those of the parents, students and other stakeholders of the WA schools we have taught in. Of course, without another inquiry into how students, parents and local teachers respond to or perceive these attributed reasons for cultural dissonance, this interpretation remains tentative. However, due to constraints of time and resources, this complementary aspect of the research can only be

carried out in a future study as it was beyond the scope of this research. It would be very interesting to find out the reverse side of the quilt.

A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Considering that cultural dissonance may have contributed to strong feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst the Asian migrant teachers, it is imperative to have an understanding of the concept of culture, and how different cultures interact when they cross paths with each other. The term ‘culture’ usually refers to the collective creation of human interaction, and thus it is made rather than occurs in nature (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Apart from being a collective creation from long processes of interaction between members of a social group, culture is transmitted from generation to generation through the human medium, such as parents, teachers, respected elders or religious leaders, and is mediated through a variety of sources, such as the media, oral tradition and lived experiences (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Culture is non-static - it is in a state of constant flux, modification and refinement by members of the social group as new information and experiences become available (Alvesson & Berg, 1992).

In general, culture has been regarded as consisting of three interdependent and interrelated dimensions, namely, material artifacts, a collective mental framework and a social and behavioural action pattern (Alvesson & Berg, 1992, Cushner & Brislin, 1996). The material artifacts are the physical, tangible and visible by-products of cultural production, such as the houses people live in and the food they eat or clothes they wear. The collective mental framework refers to their particular and yet collective mindset or attitude towards the world around them, and the collective social and behavioural action pattern refers to a distinct pattern of behaviour associated with their particular culture. According to these cultural researchers, the collective mental framework is concerned mostly with the invisible aspect of the culture, such as people’s values and beliefs, and this is the subjective culture (Cushner & Brislin, 1996) or deep culture (Guirdham, 1999). The deep culture consists “the attitude, ideals and assumptions about life that are widely shared and that guide specific behaviours” (Cushner & Brislin, 1996, p. 6). In essence, the *behaviours* can be assumed to be the by-

products of the hidden ideals, values, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of a social group. These *behaviours* are in the form of visible artifacts owned by or related to action patterns or practices of the social group (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). When two social groups with contrasting deep cultures interact, conflict in behaviour and action patterns would seem to be inevitable. Quoting Geert Hofstede's (1984) research findings of a cross-cultural study involving 80,000 IBM employees in 66 countries across seven occupations, Guirdham (1999) suggests that while the Asians possess a high 'collectivist' and 'power distance' mental framework, the 'Anglos' and the Western Europeans have the opposite. His conclusion is that:

individualists prefer self sufficiency while the collectivists give more recognition to their interdependent roles and obligation to the group... people 'group' others using salient characteristics as the basis. The group that the categorizer feels similar to and identifies with is called the 'in-group' and other groups are called 'out-groups'...Whereas individualistic societies are loosely knit social frameworks in which people primarily operate as individuals or in their immediate families, collectivist societies are composed of tight networks in which people operate as members of in-groups and out-groups, expect to look after other members of their 'in-group' in need and expect their group to look after them... In terms of relational behaviour, people in collectivist cultures, the personal relationship prevails over the task, whereas the opposite is the case for those in individualistic cultures. (Guirdham, 1999, pp.52-53)

Specifically, Guirdham (1999) pointed out that the research findings indicate that Australia ranked amongst the top five countries as having an individualist culture, along with Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain and the USA. The Asians, such as Pakistan, and South Americans, are regarded as the least prominent in individualistic culture and the most prominent in collectivistic culture.

These research findings indicate that Australians appear to be highly individualistic in their culture, tending to prefer self-sufficiency and operating in loosely knit social frameworks revolving around immediate families where tasks are more

valued than personal relationships. The opposite appears to characterize the Asian and South American cultures which tend to value roles and are more obliged to the group culture. Relationship appears to be more valued over task or individual. They are more collectivist in their culture and more interdependent as members of 'in-groups' operating in tight social frameworks with mutual obligation to each other. They expect to receive help from the members of their 'in-group' and give help to them in time of need.

Relationship between Individualistic and Collective Cultures

From this perspective, when local people with an individualist culture and Asian background migrant school practitioners of a collective culture operate within a common and formal setting of a school, conflict may occur. Reflecting on our lived experiences, particularly our critical incidents, parents' complaints and verbal abuse are indicative of their low regard or value for the parent-teacher relationship. They appear to be concerned only with the interests of their very own children with little concern for other members of the school community. As Asian migrant practitioners, it is likely that we were encultured with a mental framework that parents are members of our 'in-group' in the education of their children. Thus, we expect a high level of parental support in issues related to the education and welfare of their children. When parents complained and verbally abused us, while our interests at heart were for their own children we felt a sense of betrayal from our in-group members. The feeling was very disempowering for us. Colloquially, we call this lack of parental support as 'losing a leg'. Comments from my research participants that some parents had been very ungrateful to them are indicative of the feeling of 'losing a leg' – conveying a picture of the physical handicap of a person who has lost a leg.

Similarly, or perhaps more so, in the case of a collegial relationship, we consider our colleagues as even more intimate members of our 'in-group', especially because as we have to work with each other on a daily basis. When our colleagues were abusive and disrespectful, as illustrated in the critical incidents experienced by Hueh and Teng, we felt a deep sense of betrayal and let down. This feeling was compounded by the knowledge that neither we nor the higher authority of the school could do much about it.

As colleagues operating under the same roof on a daily basis, we would expect mutual support in all matters related to our profession. In time of difficulty, we would expect all the support from our colleagues or superiors necessary to get us through as close members of our 'in-group' of professionals. One of the most memorable and grateful experiences I had has to be the assistance and consoling remark offered to me by my School Principal when a group of students were involved in a fight during my first relief lesson (see Chapter 4). He was one of the main reasons for me to stay on teaching in that very challenging school until he retired. In the case of Hueh, the support she received from her HOLA in handling one of the difficult kids whose parent had complained about her teaching was a morale booster to her and helped her to remain positive in her teaching (see Chapter 5). In Teng's case, her Deputy Principal's advice prior to the sustained verbal abuse from a parent who complained about her 'threatening' behaviour seemed to cushion the emotional trauma following the abuse (see Chapter 5). In these incidents, all of us felt a deep sense of gratefulness and gratitude due to the support we received in time of need.

In the case of our relationship with the disruptive students, their seemingly individualistic attitude had often been the cause of our frustration in classroom teaching. Based on our lived experiences (see Chapters 4 & 5), we found that it was quite futile for us to advise students to aim higher in order to have a better future. When individual students had decided that classroom learning was for the 'brainy' ones or they were 'pre-cut' for Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges rather than for Universities, we had very little chance of getting our well intended message across to them. No matter how we pleaded or encouraged them to go further in their studies as I did with a group of Year 10 students (see Chapter 4), they would stick to their decision to leave school as soon as they could. A frustrating individualist attitude was also evident in relation to the school reward system. My student, Richard, was a typical example (See Chapter 4). He was after 'gold slips' given out by teachers as rewards for being in step with the other students in the school. I think he was clever in 'milking' the system to achieve his personal objective. I believe the idea of fairness never came into his mind.

Frustrating individualist attitudes I experienced with my students can be depicted clearly in two separate cases. The first involved a Year 9 girl, I name her Christine, and

her mother, Lorraine for reason of confidentiality. The following is a narrative illustrating their highly egocentric attitude.

Christine is a very bright 13 year old but has been performing well below her potential in class. Whenever she was given a set classroom task to complete, she would complete the task in a hurry with minimum effort and often resulted in a lot of errors. She would argue with me when I pointed out her errors and asked her to correct them. She often would not do a proper job of correcting the errors before she moved around the class and showed off her artwork. Almost invariably she would be the first off her seat and moved around the class unless she was warned of isolation to the buddy class. In addition, she was notorious in the violation of the school's mobile phone rule. Because of these prolonged undesirable behaviours, her mother, Lorraine, was called to school one day to meet me. Lorraine was very courteous in her manners and explained to me that Christine was one of the primary carers of her quadriplegic father when she went to work. She also explained that Christine's father is a brilliant Mathematician and has great influence on Christine. He is responsible for nurturing Christine not to accept any instructions without questioning them. About a week later, Christine was up to her usual antics and used her mobile phone freely in class to call her friends in full view of me and the rest of the class. Since the school had a strict mobile phone code, she was asked to surrender her mobile but she refused citing that she needed to call her father constantly to check on him. But when asked to view the number she had called, she refused. I knew then that she had been using her father as an excuse to show off her bravery to challenge me and the school concerning the mobile phone code. Her mother, Lorraine was contacted by me and she explained that she had been doing the right thing in challenging the school rule. I responded by asking her to think about the problem the school would face if every student of the school thought and acted like Christine. There was a stony silence.

Christine's case highlights the frustrating individualist attitude of many disruptive students and it seems that parents may be the instigators of this frustrating attitude. A

strict code of conduct seems to be the only means of dealing with such individualistic behaviour. It was frustrating and disempowering for we teachers having to deal with this kind of attitude on top of our other multiple priorities. Indeed, following the Christine incident, the School Administration team sat for an emergency session to formalize a set of regulations regarding the use of mobile phones in the school. Following which, a strict code of mobile phone usage was formalised and was made explicit in a school assembly. Only then did the problem dissipate. Apparently, this code is still strictly enforced more than five years after I left the school, as is evident in a newsletter from the school circulated to another school I visited a month ago.

A frustrating individualistic student attitude was also evident in an end-of-year voting for an exemplary student for a special award in a class of 26 students. The following is a description of the incident.

It was the second last day of school and students in the class were given a ballot paper each with instructions outlining how they should vote for an exemplar student in their own class for a special reward. The criteria of choosing the candidate range from academic performance, to contribution to class, teachers, students and the school in general. I was hopeful that a suitable person would be chosen for the award. Twenty-six pieces of ballot paper were issued one by one to the students. They were given five minutes to think about the candidate for the reward and write his or her name on the ballot paper and return the paper to me. Within a few seconds, they had already completed the ballot paper. I went around and collected them and started to count the votes while the class waited anxiously for the voting result. As I went through the ballot paper, I was looking for duplicates of names but none were found except one at the very end of the counting. Every student had voted for himself or herself with the exception of one girl who had voted for another student to receive the reward. She was, in fact, the most qualified student to receive the reward as most students of the class would agree. Without letting the class know about the details of the voting, the name of the student was announced to be the recipient of the reward. None of the students appeared to be surprised.

This incident may appear to be insignificant, but I was totally astounded by the egocentric attitude projected by the students. This unexpected revelation awakened me to the cultural difference between myself and my students, and thus to the need to adjust my mindset and professional praxis accordingly. The adjustment would require adaptation of my beliefs and assumptions to be more aligned with individualistic cultural characteristics as a means of minimizing my feelings of frustration and disempowerment.

Power Distance

The second dimension in a cross-cultural relationship postulated by Guirdham (1999) is power distance (PD). Power distance is defined as:

The degree of separation between people of various social statuses... Low PD cultures endorse egalitarianism, while the high PD cultures endorse hierarchies. In high PD cultures, relations between different social statuses are formal, often patron-client nature, information flow is formal and restricted and organizations operate in rigid vertical hierarchies. In low PD societies however, relations are more open, informal, information flows are more functional and less restricted and organizations tend to have flat hierarchies (p. 53).

The PD index scores in Figure 16 show that Malaysia (the country where I was born and brought up) ranks amongst the top in terms of high power distance, followed closely by the Philippines and four South American countries; those particularly low on this variable are Austria, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, and the four Scandinavian countries. Great Britain is tenth from the bottom in power distance, Germany eleventh, and the USA is sixteenth; France, however, is fifteenth from the highest.” (Guirdham, 1999, pp.53).

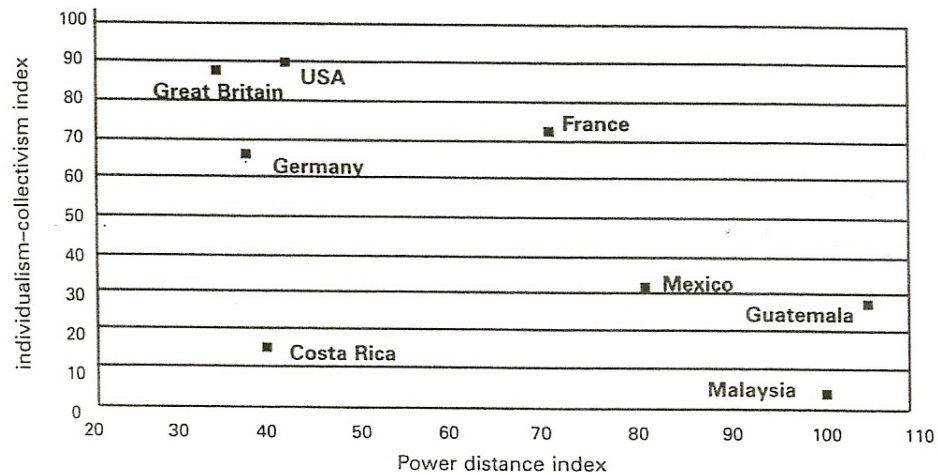


Figure 16 *Power Distance Index versus Individualism-Collectivism Indices (Source: Guirdham, 1999, pp. 55).*

The research findings suggest that most ‘Anglos’ and Western Europeans operate generally in less formal relationships. They operate under less hierarchal structures, whereas the Asians, particularly Malaysians, Pakistani and South Americans, operate in more formal and hierarchal relationships. Based on this research, it is not unreasonable to assume that Asians appear to be more comfortable operating in a more formal and hierarchal environment. This is certainly true in my own case. My preference, which I believe I share with my three research participants, is for a more formal and hierarchal organizational structure. Within such an organizational environment, mental framework and action patterns would be more predictable and this would provide a stabilizing feeling particularly when confronted with a range of social unknowns. For we Asian migrant school practitioners operating within a highly individualistic and low power distance culture contributes to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, leading to frustration and disempowerment.

The frustration of we Asian migrant practitioners operating within a seemingly low power distance individualistic cultural setting can be illustrated in a diplomatic incidence cited by Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede (2002). It was an incident involving a North Korean delegation to United Nations Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 and the American airline security personnel at Frankfurt airport (see Appendix E). The

Koreans, as have many Asians who have internalized a high power distance and collectivist culture, felt that the American security personnel were high-handed, impolite and disrespectful, whereas the security personnel were of the opinion that they were just performing their duties as individuals and considered the Koreans to be taking things out of proportion especially when they accused the Americans of insulting their whole nation by subjecting them to an act of savagery. It seems that the root of this diplomatic clash lies with the lack of cultural sensitivity of the security personnel, which was evident also in Hueh's experience of the constant intrusion of one of her colleagues into her classroom (see Chapter 5) which Hueh labeled as insensitive and disrespectful as she considered herself to be much older than the colleague. The constant intrusion frustrated her even though her colleague might not have been aware that her action was disrespectful. Nevertheless, I believe that her colleague had been culturally insensitive (Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede, 2002). What appears to be even more frustrating in my case, however, was that while adapting to the individualistic and low power distance action pattern, I was confronted with the high power distance action pattern of my HOLA when he walked into my class without permission or explanation and took over my class even though the students were on-task and behaving normally or when the Deputy Principal of another school overruled in front of my students my decision to discipline the students. What frustrated me most was the apparent cultural insensitivity of my HOLA. This conclusion appears to have the support of my mentor and supervisor, Associate Professor Peter Taylor, who labeled it as a case of workplace bullying which apparently is not uncommon in Australia.

In sum, the resumption of our teaching careers in this country following our arrival from various Asian countries signified the meeting, or perhaps, clash of two contrasting cultures. There was a significantly high level of cultural dissonance when we Asian migrant school practitioners, who were born, bred and instilled with a collectivist cultural mental framework and brought up in a high power distance social context, operated within a society with an individualistic culture and low power distance social context as revealed in this research (see Chapters 5 & 6). In order to fit within the majority culture, we Asian migrant teachers had adapted to it mostly by our own devices and in the shortest span of time. In layman's terms, we were thrown into the

deep end of the pool and left to our own devices to sink or to survive. There was little or no formal initiation or socialization of migrant teachers into the system of education when we began teaching in this country. Although the announcement of the Western Australia Charter of Multiculturalism by Dr Geoff Gallop in 2004, then the Premier and Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests of Western Australia, was a step in the right direction for Asian migrant teachers by providing assurance of our rightful place within this society, the legislation was aimed at the wider society rather than specifically at Asian migrant school practitioners. In any case, the Charter has since receded into the background and thus has had little direct impact on the socialization of Asian migrant teachers into the local culture following the sudden departure of the Premier from the political arena.

SUMMARY

Recounting and reflecting on our lived experiences as Asian migrant teachers has generated an insight of cultural dissonance that appears to be the foundation of a mindset or feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy. From a social cultural perspective when a collectivist culture of Asian migrant school practitioners operates within the individualist cultural framework of WA schools, cultural dissonance would seem to be inevitable. An obvious sign of cultural dissonance would be the problem of cross-cultural relationship which has been the source of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy among we Asian migrant teachers. In order to free ourselves from the negative feelings, we need to minimize the negative feelings by examining critically the underlying factors associated with the cross-cultural relationship. The following chapter is devoted to a discussion of ways of minimizing cultural dissonance through critical reflection on the discussion I had with my three participants. Thus far, I believe, like me, my three participants must have lived in an 'unfree' world of existence dominated by feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy. Uncovering the source of cultural dissonance and problems of cross-cultural relationship would be a way of emancipating ourselves from the 'unfree' world of existence.

CHAPTER 7

Towards Emancipation by Minimizing Cultural Dissonance

OVERVIEW

In Chapter 6, I argued that cultural dissonance between our collectivist culture and the seemingly individualist local culture of WA schools appears to have been the fundamental issue associated with the difficulty in cross-cultural relationships. I have illustrated how ‘culture clash’ translated into feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst several Asian migrant school practitioners in WA. Emancipation from these negative feelings needs to be a priority concern of all stakeholders of the education system. Although instigating debate and advocating change of others are two of the implicit agendas of this emancipatory effort, I believe that a good place to begin the process of emancipation is with we Asian migrant teachers, that is, change through critical self reflection in line with the biblical principle cited in Chapter 1. Critical self-reflection can be regarded as a process of ‘soul searching’ about our cultural attributions of others from our collective cultural lenses. Cultural attribution *per se* may not be the source of negative feelings, but rather our presupposition of others in the process of cultural attribution may be the source (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Thus, critical self-reflection or analysis of our presuppositions, I believe, could be key to minimizing cultural dissonance in our effort to emancipate ourselves from the ‘false world of existence’ which has been at the source of our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as Asian migrant teachers in WA.

CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

In Chapter 6 I interpreted the resumption of the teaching careers of four Asian migrant teachers (including me) in WA as representing an intrusion of a minority collectivist

culture into the majority local individualist culture. I illustrated how the intrusion resulted in a clash of two distinct cultures which gave rise to cultural dissonance. Cultural dissonance was defined as a conflict of mental frameworks and manifestations amongst people of different cultures. As these were manifested in cross-cultural behaviour and action patterns, the conflict had generated feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst us which, I believe, requires urgent attention. A reduction of these negative feelings entails, therefore, minimization of cultural dissonance as one of the most important priorities of Asian migrant teachers. A good place to begin the process is through critical self-reflection on our cultural attributions and presuppositions of others because I believe that the way we attribute, or more specifically presuppose others, from our collective cultural perspective has been the source of our negative feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy in our professional praxis in WA schools.

Attribution and Presupposition of Others

Reflecting on my experience in choosing an award winner through voting by the students in a class of Year 9 students (cited in Chapter 4), I believe my actions had been prompted by my collective cultural beliefs and assumptions that my students would act in a 'collective' manner. I assumed that my students would select the most deserving classmate to receive the year end award. To my surprise, when I tallied the ballot papers, I found that every student had selected himself or herself as the award winner with the exception of one student who, in my opinion, was the most deserving student based on the set selection criteria for the award. All students with the exception of one girl in this case valued themselves so highly that they appeared to have little regard for the selection criteria or their classmates. Similarly in the case of Hueh (cited in Chapter 5), her action in helping her colleague to gain access to the 'out of schedule' Mathematics laboratory was prompted by her cultural belief and assumption of 'collectivism', in layman's terms, 'good things meant to be shared'. She attributed her colleague to have a 'collective' mental framework and thus presupposed him to be a 'grateful' person who was conscious of her kind act and thus would return her kindness. When she was refused her pre-approved access into the laboratory because of him she felt betrayed. When Hueh and I

reflected on this incident during the interview, we concluded, in Hueh's remark that "he (the colleague) is just different from us". The critical self reflection had awakened us to the cultural reality that we Asian migrant teachers often assumed our colleagues' culture to be collective like ours and thus presupposed them to behave and act in a 'collective' way. When our colleagues failed to live up to our 'collective' expectations, we felt frustrated or even betrayed which in turn led to feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy.

Through critical self-reflection we came to the conclusion that we Asian migrant teachers and the majority of students and teachers we worked with have two contrasting cultures. We are distinctly 'collective' in our cultural beliefs and assumptions while the majority of our students and colleagues appeared to have more individualist cultural beliefs and assumptions. It is not the difference in culture that was the source of our frustration but rather the contrasting inherent cultural beliefs, assumptions, values and action patterns associated with the cultures. More specifically, I believe, it was our attribution of culture and subsequent presupposition of our students and colleagues from our collective cultural perspective that was the source of our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy in our professional praxis. The uncovering of our misaligned cultural attribution and presupposition of the culture of the others from our collective perspective awakened us to the primary source of our frustration. Essentially, self-reflection enabled us to put our collective culture and the seemingly individualistic culture of our students and colleagues into proper perspective. Most important of all, the exercise prompted us to modify our cultural assumptions and expectations of other people which, I believe, is the key to minimizing our cultural dissonance with the dominant culture we work within.

In-group Membership

Attribution and presupposition of others' culture could be accentuated by our profession and work setting. Since we were working within the same profession and school settings, we tended to identify our colleagues as members within a 'collective' school organizational culture. This default attribution led to our presupposition that all school

members and parents were in-group members regardless of their culture, personality or character (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Our colleagues, in particular, were regarded as close in-group members as we had similar duties and responsibilities. This is often done without the awareness of our work colleagues. In this way we presupposed our colleagues to behave or act according to our in-group set of expectations. In short, the categorization was culturally charged by our collective cultural beliefs and assumptions, we expected their behaviour and action patterns to be consistent with our collective beliefs and assumptions as in-group members. Frustration, disappointment and even feelings of betrayal began to surface when our colleagues failed to act or behave in the way we expected.

Apart from the profession and work setting, our critical self-reflection also revealed that we categorized others with reference to our previous lived experiences as well. Prior to our arrival in WA, we experienced school environments within which our colleagues were generally 'professional', respectful and helpful. Collegial support had been the norm in our previous school settings in our home countries. Naturally, we expected similar school environments when we resumed our teaching career in WA schools. But objectively, as pointed out by Guirdham (1999), "there is often more variation within groups than between them" (p.163). The author appears to suggest that we cannot categorize all our colleagues as our in-group members, least of all as having a similar cultural mental framework and action patterns even though we work in the same profession and work settings. When Hueh and I reflected on the treatment she received from one of her colleagues, we concluded that our fault lay with our default categorization of our colleagues as our in-group members, possessing a collective mental framework and action patterns similar to ours. When our colleagues failed to live up to our expectations, as in the case of Hueh, we felt disappointed, frustrated and even betrayed. Similarly, Teng's inclusion by default of parents as her in-group members based on her lived experience of total parental support (see Chapter 4), as had I (see Chapter 3), was based on a presupposition that parents were our close in-group members and they were 'die-hard' teacher supporters, as were our own parents who would act collectively with teachers in the education of their children. However, such a presupposition led to us a 'reality check' and a rude awakening when some parents turned

against us. Reflecting critically on the treatment that Teng and I received from parents, we came to realize that our frustrations were the result of our inclusion of all parents by default as our in-group members consequent to our previous experiences of total parental support and respect we received while teaching in our home country schools, and how our own parents supported our teachers while we were in school.

In sum, critical self reflection has awakened us to the cultural reality that we are operating within a social context where the majority seemingly value individualism over collectivism. Therefore, our presupposition of others based on our collective cultural beliefs and assumptions ought to be avoided, and our categorization of our colleagues and parents as in-group by default consequent to our belief in the same profession, work setting or previous lived experiences should be suspended until we have gained a better understanding of the culture of others (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). This critical self-reflection, I believe, has prepared us to be more sensitive as Asian migrant teachers in dealing with the issue of cross-cultural relationships between us and our students and their parents, thereby helping us to minimize cultural dissonance which has been a major source of our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy.

Life Experiences and Principles

Considering most Asian countries have just emerged from a period of extreme hardship and suffering, courtesy of the Japanese occupation in the first half of the 1940's and adjustment to a life of being independent from colonial powers, most Asian migrant teachers, particularly those who were born in the 1950's and early 60's, would have experienced more challenging life experiences prior to becoming teachers compared to those born later. Apart from being moulded in their common cultural milieu, they would also have been shaped by a mindset particular to their harsh lived experiences, like me. *Although I was born ten years after the end of Japanese occupation of Borneo, the effect of the occupation lingered until much later. Many of my contemporaries had had their family bread winners taken away to the Japanese labour camps in different parts of the island. Many did not return and those who returned had permanent disability suffered*

under the Japanese guards. Although my father was not one of the forced labourers, my grandfather was one of the Japanese prisoners and faced their firing squad as he attempted to escape and was buried in a mass grave. Being the eldest son, my father was left to fend for his mother and siblings while supporting his immediate family. It would not be too difficult for anyone to imagine the kind life chances we had in the extended family in a country pillaged and impoverished by the Japanese.

In my case, the universal truths, hard life experiences together with my success stories combined shaped my worldview and attitude towards education. Thus, when confronted with behaviours and action patterns contrary to my pre-cast mindset, I tended to presuppose students of this postmodern world to be naturally self-centred, individualistic and having poor work attitudes, and students opting for TAFE instead of TEE as necessarily lazy or unwilling to become the ‘vessels’ of knowledge and skill! However, critical self-reflection in this study has awakened me to the reality that my presupposition of my students was unfairly biased. It has been based on my life experiences and principles accentuated by my success stories. These, I believe, have given rise to internalized biases used in my unfair presupposition of my students and thus have given rise to cultural dissonance. A clear example of such a presupposition is about a group of Year 10 boys cited in Chapter 5.

The experience may appear to be insignificant but it was a mindset changing one. To continue to presuppose these students as generally lazy and with poor work attitudes would be unfair when I found out that they had a very different perception of classroom learning from mine. While they perceived ‘natural abilities’ as the key to their lives, my life experiences prompted my belief and attitude that hard-work and dedication are the key to their life chances. The students expressed that no amount of effort in class or school could change their life chances as they perceived they were ‘not cut for the classroom work’ which is designed for the ‘brainy ones’. My immediate perception of these students’ responses was that they were making excuses in place of putting in hard work and dedication to be successful in their school education. Critical self-reflection alerted me to my mis-aligned presupposition of the students according to my culturally and experientially internalized biases. My experience with this group of Year 10 boys served to remind me of the fallibility of presupposition when it is conceived narrowly

with reference to my life experience – a mixture of culturally and experientially internalized biases. In sum, my critical reflection on my experience with the group of Year 10 boys has prompted me to suspend my presupposition towards my students according to my own culturally and experientially internalized biases.

Attribution of Action and Presupposition of their Meanings

Attribution of actions can be another source of cultural dissonance. We often attribute actions of others from our own cultural and experiential perspective. Thus, we often presuppose meanings of an action in a particular way (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). The presupposition of action meaning could have a deeper implication such as categorization of the actors (Guirdham, 1999). For example, a negative attribution would lead us to presuppose others as out-group members who are not helpful or ill-mannered, and thus not to be approached, which could lead to relationship break-down and occurrences of cultural dissonance.

When Hueh's colleague intruded into her classroom space or Teng's colleague 'waved' her away, they attributed their colleagues' actions as rude and disrespectful and their behaviours and actions as contrary to their expectations of professional and social etiquettes (Smith & Bond, 1993). Through the interviews with these two participants, I uncovered a more serious ramification, that is, both participants had labeled their respective colleagues as unprofessional and disrespectful work mates and both had avoided contact with them.

Hueh's and Teng's attributions of their colleagues' actions may be accurate, but presupposing their colleagues to be their out-group members with negative personality traits is likely a case of mis-aligned presupposition. Through critical self-reflection, we came to an awareness that these attributions of actions and presuppositions could be faulty. Although both participants did not have the chance to follow up their presuppositions with their respective colleagues about their actions, because both had moved on to other schools, we came to the realization that our attribution and presupposition could be faulty and thus had led to our negative feelings. At the very

least, this awareness has helped us to minimize the cultural dissonance between us and our colleagues.

One of ways we could take to minimize cultural dissonance is to solicit explanations of our colleagues' actions that we deem initially to be undesirable. When we "become more knowledgeable and better informed of other's cultural codes, we could break the cycle of misattribution" (Smith & Bond, 1993, 178). When my HOLA intruded into my classroom and 'hijacked' my lesson while my students were busy compiling their story books, I attributed his action to him being rude and disrespectful and presupposed him as a person with a similar personality trait. Unlike Hueh and Teng, I sought clarification from him about his seemingly disrespectful and unprofessional behaviour and found that although I might have attributed his actions correctly, to categorize him as a person having negative personality traits would be unfair. Thus, seeking an explanation of others' actions may be a way to prevent misattribution and unfair categorization of their personality traits, which, in turn, could lead towards a minimization of cultural dissonance and reduction of the feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy (Smith & Bond, 1993).

Parochialism

In our professional praxes, we often predispose ourselves to be better than others. At times, we may perceive ourselves as having 'best practice' without due consideration of the others' background or context (Freeman, 1998). When the parochial belief becomes entrenched in our mental framework, particularly when we have achieved *success* in our areas of expertise or spheres of influence, we begin to make judgment of others based on our own standards.

When the group of Year 10 students suggested that classroom learning is only for the 'brainy' lot (cited in Chapter 5), my parochial attitude started to kick in straightaway. Seemingly I began to say, "Considering the background I came from, if I can do it, anybody can do it". Because I believed that hard work and dedication to task were the keys to success, rather than intelligence, I believed that the 'best practice' to achieve

success was through hard work. I had disregarded as opportunity to learn, family background and development level as primary factors of academic success and started to presuppose the students as generally lazy and having poor work attitudes. However, through critical self-reflection I realized that my presupposition was faulty. Similarly Freeman (1998) had regarded individualism and competition as the ‘best practice’ in the delivery of early childhood education. Her parochial belief prompted her to presuppose that the modern Western and US approach in the teaching of arts founded on “creativity where developing artists are likely to create a bold and innovative style, and then move towards traditional compositions like those of the masters” to be the ‘best practice’. However, her parochial attitude about ‘best practice’ was seriously challenged when she observed a five to six years’ olds art lesson in China where an ‘evolutionary’ view of creativity prevailed instead of the Western ‘revolutionary’ view. She found that “teaching by holding her [the student’s] hand” and “learning by continual careful shaping and moulding” is the ‘best practice’ in the Chinese social context. Like me, Freeman’s (1998) experience awakened her to her parochialism that it would be inappropriate to assume that our ‘best practice’ is the ‘best practice’ in all contexts. Her experience in an art lesson in a Chinese classroom appears to suggest that parochialism could be a source of cultural dissonance. Awareness of the impact of parochialism, that is, when we presuppose ourselves as having ‘the best’ practice, can help to minimize cultural dissonance. I came to this awareness through critical self-reflection whereas Freeman (1998) became aware of the impact through a study tour to China. In her words,

The most important souvenir I brought home was an appreciation for how culturally-determined beliefs, values, and goals have reflected individuals’ definition of childhood, parenting, and teaching... I am learning to broaden my own perspective of what’s normal – to quit applying a single standard for adaptive, healthy, and competent behaviours... (p. 79).

In Freeman’s (1998) experience, she learned to become non-judgmental as the best of the practices she knew well could be very different from the best practices of other cultures. Postponing interpretation and being non-judgmental are challenges that school

practitioners of all cultures would need to be confronted with within increasingly multicultural school environments. Overcoming this challenge is imperative in minimizing cultural dissonance which is at the root of our negative feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as Asian migrant teachers in WA.

Attribution and Presupposition in Cross Cultural Communication

Language is “an efficient means of transmitting symbolic information to achieve instrumental and affective goals... it casts a net of mutual intelligibility around those who use it and becomes a unifying force for group cohesion.” (Smith & Bond, 1993, p. 179). However, when language fails to be instrumental and effective in accomplishing the goals as expected across a cultural divide, cultural dissonance can become amplified. Reflecting on the critical incident with the parents of Justin, described in Chapter 4, although Justin’s mother might have over-reacted following Justin’s report of my ‘name calling’, I believe there was also an element of miscommunication due to my accent together with the low tone of my voice. When a name is pronounced in a foreign accent particularly amidst the interference of background noise, the name can sound very different when received. Pronouncing the name ‘Justin’ with a low tone of voice I believe could be heard as ‘Justine’ within the particular classroom setting. Similarly, pronouncing the name, ‘Daniel’ in a low tone of voice could be heard as ‘Danielle’, particularly when ‘Dan-iel’ is emphasized in place of ‘Da-niel’, as occurred in a less significant incident with a student in another class at the time. Teng expressed a similar view that calling the names of students in a low tone of voice could cause a poor reception of instructions intended for the students whose names are being called. Teng resolved this problem by speaking loudly, as a result of which she expressed that she has avoided, to a large extent, miscalling students’ names or miscommunicating classroom instructions.

Considering that the ‘name calling’ was for me totally unintentional and an insignificant issue, the incident should not have attracted such an angry response from Justin’s mother. Nevertheless, it did. Reflecting on the incident, I believe that the

attribution of the name calling and the presupposition of its intention on the part of Justin's mother were the real issues behind the incident. Although I did not have an opportunity to investigate the issue further with Justin's mother, I believe that she could have taken the name calling as an act of degrading her son, considering Justin is the only boy in the family and the smallest boy in the class.

Although Smith and Bond's (1993) example of a cartoon (see Figure 17) is not specifically about name calling, I believe that it illustrates the problem of cross-cultural communication we experienced in our professional practice as Asian migrant school practitioners. The initial problem lies with the attribution of the word "Won't" as having a negative connotation. The subsequent problem is the presupposition of the word to the bad intention of the initiator. The illustration in Figure 17 may appear to be simplistic but when this particular cartoon was shown to Teng she recounted a similar experience in her teaching career which led to, in her words, "a lot of frustration".



Source: Reproduced with permission from Feign (1987).

Figure 17 *Intercultural language and communication difficulty* (Adapted from Smith & Bond, 1993, p. 173)

Figure 17 suggests that the initiator of the conversation needs to be more critically aware of the receptor's culture and thus be sensitive in the choice of words to use in a conversation in order to avoid misattribution and negative presupposition of the communication. 'Won't you' could imply a negative feeling with the recipient from an Asian culture, as in my case. The phrase conjures a negative image in my mind of a person of Asian background and that the initiator was either offering something to his Asian background wife against her will or commanding her to accept whatever he ordered. In both respects, they were perceived by her as negative connotations. To avoid such negative attribution, the phrase could be substituted with, 'Would you like...', which would convey a much more pleasant and positive message of respect and perhaps love for his wife. My calling of a Year 8 boy 'Justin' was attributed to me calling him 'Justine' with a presupposition that I was degrading him. Similarly, in one of the speeches of the Opposition Leader in his recent general election campaign, he intended to point out the indecision of Australia's first female Prime Minister to engage in three public debates by using the phrase, 'When she says no, she means yes'. To people of Asian background, this is simply an example of a person changing her mind. However, this remark was picked up angrily by a few political candidates of another party to be an act of degrading women. I believe that most people of an Asian cultural background would probably be left to wonder what the real issue was behind the remark. This is an example of cross-cultural miscommunication in which people of different cultures would find it incomprehensible to gauge the meaning of the language used to convey a message which appears to be perfectly understandable. When the 'understandable' has been presupposed to mean otherwise it becomes 'incomprehensible' courtesy of the presupposition of a remark based on a set of cultural values associated with, in this case, the sexual abuse of women.

In minimizing cross-cultural communication difficulties, Smith and Bond (1993) suggest that when confronted with an awkward or unclear question or request it is imperative for the respondent to seek clarification or explanation. Question and answer in keeping communication open is the key to better communication between parties from different cultural backgrounds. It would not only be one of the ways of reducing cross cultural misunderstanding but also a way of minimizing cultural dissonance.

Cross-cultural communication stereotyping had also been a source of cultural dissonance and thus a source of feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy. Reflecting critically on our teaching performance over the years in WA schools, Hueh, Teng and I had the 'mythical' belief that our Asian accents were major barriers in our cross-cultural communication. The belief was accentuated often by *complaints* of students and parents. In short, we assumed that our students had great difficulty in understanding us because of our accents. However, my personal experience when I talked to two girls during a lunchtime duty session (see Chapter 5) revealed otherwise. Without the revelation, the mythical belief would still be one of my greatest frustrations in teaching as it is almost impossible to change one's accent. The mythical belief was further dispelled by the recount of my own lived experience of being taught by Irish La Salle Brothers.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have illustrated how cultural dissonance between several Asian migrant teachers and local WA teachers, parents and students has been the result largely of our cultural differences. Our Asian cultural background has endowed us with a collectivist culture while our colleagues and students seem to have an individualist culture. Through critical self reflection we came to an awareness and understanding that it was not simply the cultural difference that lay at the root of our cultural dissonance but rather the way we had attributed to our colleagues and students a particular group identity, behaviour and action patterns in accordance with our collective cultural beliefs and assumptions. The reflection also brought to our attention that attribution *per se* may not be the source of cultural dissonance but rather our presupposition of behaviour, actions and personality traits of our colleagues and students.

Considering cultural dissonance to be a fundamental issue associated with feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst these Asian migrant school practitioners, minimization of the dissonance needs to be a priority concern of all stakeholders of the education system. The three Asian migrant school practitioners in this study and I commenced a 'soul searching' process of pinpointing the source of cultural

dissonance, and thus our negative feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy, with the ultimate aim of minimizing and freeing us from our 'false world of existence'. The results of our critical reflection should, I hope, awaken the reader to the reality of how Asian migrant teachers like us may have experienced problems of cross-cultural relationships with our colleagues, students and parents. We have taken our own initiative in trying to help minimize cultural dissonance through critical self reflection. I believe that our 'confession' might also awaken our colleagues, students, parents and other stakeholders to the possible 'plight' of Asian migrant teachers and thus evoke a sense of empathy and a shift towards being more accommodating and sensitive in their daily interactions with us. In addition, it is my hope that the airing of this critical reflection in this thesis and potentially in other communication media can trigger wider debate and discussions on ways to help Asian migrant teachers to be better integrated into the school system of WA. A combination of these outcomes could be a catalyst for initiating new public policy initiatives for improving the confidence of Asian migrant school practitioners in their professional praxis.

CHAPTER 8

Closing Reflections

ENLIGHTENMENT AND EMANCIPATION

The prolonged recounting of and critical self reflection on my lived experiences and subsequent incorporation of the lived experiences of three other Asian migrant school practitioners provided the basis for an emancipating writing experience. I found it emancipating because it created a critical awareness of my own and others' feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy and of a range of cross-cultural reasons associated with them. It is my hope that the result of this critical inquiry might serve other stakeholders by alerting them to the need to search for means of redress. The process began with my research participants and me reflecting critically on our teaching experiences in relation to our cultural beliefs and values and our lived experiences along the line of the biblical principle, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3) which has been taken as a referent in this inquiry.

How shall I talk of the sea to the frog,

if it has never left his pond?

How shall I talk of the frost to the bird of the summerland,

if it has never left the land of its birth?

How shall I talk of life with the sage,

if he is prisoner of his doctrine? Chung Tsu, 4th Century B.C. (Fantini, 2001).

The engagement of a wider audience in examining critically our documented feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy is imperative as the engagement would alert and prompt them in helping us to ease these negative feelings. This would be an attempt at bringing 'the frog out of the pond, the bird out of the land its birth or the sage out of

his doctrine' in order that these feelings can be examined in a more 'objective' way. This exposure may help as well to neutralize some of the cultural and experiential biases and parochialism in the attribution of negative feelings. As my two experienced teacher educator supervisors and mentors, Associate Professor Peter C Taylor and Dr Elisabeth Settelmaier commented, these feelings of disempowerment may not be limited to Asian migrant teachers. It is likely that other school practitioners in WA and in Australia have similar feelings except that their extent and the underlying reasons may be somewhat different. In addition, these feelings could have been simmering below the surface for a long period of time, and thus sharing them might encourage their surfacing amongst others. In sum, foregrounding these deep-seated feelings from different perspectives should help to reveal their extent and, more importantly, enable Asian migrant school practitioners to have a more circumspect view of the issue of social equity. Such an outcome would provide Asian migrant school practitioners with a means for judging the impact of the Charter of Multiculturalism of WA.

PERSONAL LEARNING AND EMANCIPATION

The critical self reflection of my lived experience as an Asian migrant school practitioner has been a liberating experience for a person who has had little exposure to worldviews other than those of positivism and objectivism. My religious conviction has played a part in the gradual shift from this entrenched worldview towards enlightenment and emancipation. But exposure to naturalist paradigms and a multi-paradigmatic research design space brought to my attention by my supervisors and mentors, Associate Professor Peter Taylor, and Dr. Elisabeth Settelmaier, greatly impacted upon my changing worldview (see Taylor, 2008). My journey of enlightenment and emancipation began with their advice to write autobiographically and narratively. Spurred on by Ellis' (1993) recounting of her experience of the sudden death of her brother and by Richardson's (2000) evocative writing of narratives of self, the recounting of my lived experience as an Asian school practitioner in WA created experiences that evoked a feeling of liberation never experienced or envisaged before. The evocative narrative of self had revealed the need to delay the attribution of my negative feelings to the external

environment. Others became comparatively less important than ‘I’ in the process. ‘Change begins at home’ instead of with others was a realization that emerged from the critical self-reflection process. Though limited in scope, it was a process that may help to inform others of the existence of our ‘subterranean’ negative disempowering feelings. This writing now serves as an open invitation to all stakeholders in an attempt to explain our feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy via a process called ‘pedagogical thoughtfulness’ that may engage any reader in an important issue that needs resolving urgently. Perhaps, my readers might take on a similar critical self-reflection process if they are experiencing disempowering feelings in their professional practices, thereby enabling their ‘others’ to help them to ‘see’ the possible reasons for their feelings. In sum, the critical self-reflection process was a personal liberation learning experience that enabled me to come to terms with my own entrenched worldview and deep feelings about my own professional praxis.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

One of the most debilitating and disempowering feelings experienced at the outset of the learning process would have to be the constant ‘threatening’ reminder of the need for quality assurance. Initially, the demand for quality assurance was constraining of my creative expression and exacted severe limitations on what and how I could express my experiences. The limiting feeling in the recounting and critical self-reflection of my lived experience, I believe, was the result of my prior training and experience in the positivist paradigm. This mindset was reinforced ironically by the concept of “so-called parallel or quasi-foundational criteria or the trustworthiness criteria” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 233). As if the message of the link with the positivist paradigm was not clear enough, these writers described the link in detail in the form of parallel criteria: internal validity with credibility, external validity with transferability, reliability with dependability and objectivity with confirmability. The description of these links served initially to remind me of the need for ‘objectivity’ in my writing, not dissimilar from that required in the positivist paradigm. However, after further careful analysis of the description of the parallel criteria, I was prompted to the idea to use them to guide my

narrative writing (see Chapter 2). This ‘enlightenment’ eased the grip of the limiting feeling in me in the writing of this thesis. They guided the methodological process of my writing in producing literary work that can be considered to be rigorous and that serves the purposes that it set out to accomplish.

Throughout the course of this research, the participants’ constructions and their underlying value structures as the outcomes of this research have been solicited and honored, and this is a way of judging the fairness of this research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Although this thesis is yet to be judged by the public, preliminary indications from my research participants indicate its ‘proximity’ and ‘alignedness’ in terms of their feelings and perceptions. Ellis and Bochner (2000) regard this as the evocation of empathic resonance within them as a good indicator of the validity of writing. This writing has also been emotionally engaging, particularly with those critical incidents experienced by myself and my fellow Asian migrant school practitioners. At this stage, I am aware that the writing is also emotionally engaging for those with whom I shared the lived experiences. However, my own experiences with others’ writing, such as that of Caroline Ellis, point me to the feeling that a number of people would be emotionally ‘touched’ by the recounting. Personally, the recounting and critical self-reflection captivated my focus and energy in the completion of this thesis. My experience in sharing my stories with other Asian migrant teachers evoked a feeling of ‘togetherness’ and mutual sympathy on the issues being recounted, such as the lack of support from parents in the education of their own children and the lack of respect of fellow school practitioners who were considered as in-group members. This sharing of my experience was intended to help them to ‘apprehend their own worlds’ which is a way of judging the ontological authenticity of this research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 248). I envisage the writing might have strong verisimilitude for non-Asian migrant teachers, and perhaps teachers in general, particularly amongst those who have similar lived experiences. Thus, quality is in part assured by its power to captivate readers’ attention to want to follow my narrative to its conclusion, as I did with Caroline Ellis’ story.

Quality can also be judged by the degree of emotional engagement – the feeling generated through the reading. As I felt strongly sympathetic towards a stranger on a piece of writing as in the case of Caroline’s story, I envisage emotional engagement of

all readers who may have gone through similar experiences to mine. My reading of Caroline's story was charged with emotion, I felt captivated and sympathetic, not because of her literary skill in expository writing, but because we shared the common grief of sudden passing of our young brothers. Though we are strangers miles apart, I felt a sense of connectedness with her experience. Likewise, in the context of this research, I anticipate this recounting of my lived experience to be captivating and emotionally engaging, and that it may generate a feeling of connectedness amongst those who have gone through similar experiences in our professional praxes. Richardson (2000) termed this form of writing 'evocative self-narrative'. I envisage this writing would evoke feelings of sympathy amongst readers, thus making them want to respond to the issue being written about which is a way of judging the catalytic authenticity of this research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In practice, this way of judging quality is about pedagogical thoughtfulness – a concept promoted by Max Van Manen (2002) who considers that the quality of writing lies with practical implications for professional praxis, that is, to draw the attention of readers to real life issues and to arouse feelings that would propel them to take practical action such as instigating debate in order to bring about change. Such an interventionary role would be a means of judging the tactical authenticity of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). In sum, an 'authentic' autoethnographic account should:

- represent a faithful and comprehensive rendition of the author's experience;
- transform the author through self-explication; and
- inform the reader of an experience which he or she may or may not have experienced or is likely to experience in the future which he or she has been unable to share with his or her wider professional community as a catalyst for debate and own construction to transform practice (McIlveen's, 2008, p.4).

PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS

The recounting and critical self-reflection of my lived experience was not without problem. One of the difficult problems to resolve was a 'relapse' into positivism in the process of analysis and description of the account of critical self-reflection. Thus, one

might encounter words and terms reflecting positivism in the account. Other problems or limitations of this research included concern for quality assurance which impacted initially upon the creativity of my writing. The shift from a positivist to a more humanistic worldview had also been difficult because the humanistic autoethnographic account demanded intimate details of my personal self to be aired in order to achieve a thick description of my lived experience (Geertz, 1973). The concern was for the privacy of the details being released in this writing.

The concern for confidentiality of information provided was also a major concern of my research participants despite my earnest assurance of confidentiality. The expression of their negative feelings against the school, the system and their colleagues, especially, had been calculated and careful. Great effort had to be expended to get the detailed description of the critical incidents. My prolonged engagement with them showed signs of fatigue as I sought to verify and add to the information gained from them towards the end of this research. Getting written texts from them was intended as a research task but it did not eventuate, due probably to their concern for privacy. Information gathering was restricted to informal discussions and semi-structured interviews.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research was intended as an autoethnographic account of my lived experience as an Asian migrant school practitioner in WA. This research stemmed from strong feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy I experienced in three Government schools in WA., and from the WA Charter of Multiculturalism and the Better Schools' reform. This research has been a life changing experience in many ways. This has been a self learning process characterized by critical self-reflection. My Christian belief in the principle taken as the title of Chapter 1 of this thesis, I believe, has facilitated my critical self-reflection process. On the whole, the process has awakened me to the understanding that the entrenched positivist attribution of my feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy as an Asian Migrant school practitioner to 'others' is fallible and thus shifted my attribution of 'others' as the root of my negative feelings to

'I' and perhaps 'others' as well. The 'I' has been 'fore-grounded' and the 'others' have been 'backgrounded'. The shift has also resulted in an easing of the feeling of inhibition of expression which I experienced at the initial stage of this research. The easing of the inhibition has given rise to freedom of expression within myself and this new found freedom was not only liberating but it has enabled me to air my lived experience as a child and adult in a somehow unrestricted way. This research has been an experience of personal transformation not only in terms of my positivist mindset and worldview, but more importantly an inner feeling of freedom. In short, critical self-reflection has been 'proven' to be a potent means of personal transformation. In short, this research experience has been a gradual process of enlightenment leading to emancipation reminiscent of Jesus Christ's miracle of curing the blind described in the Gospel of Mark (8: 22-26) with a number of implications.

The sharing my lived experiences with three other Asian migrant school practitioners was aimed at a gradual process of enlightenment and emancipation of other Asian migrant school practitioners beginning with my research participants in addition to authenticate my account. The sharing was fundamentally aimed at reducing the feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy amongst the participants and me, in a way freeing us from our perceived 'unfree' or 'false' world of existence as it had occurred to me. Thus sharing my experience, I believed, would help to ease the feelings of disempowerment and inefficacy of my participants, in particular, and other migrant teachers, in general, as they become aware they are not alone in their career journeys as migrant school practitioners in this country. As far as authentication of my account is concerned, the participants' accounts were analyzed to gauge the degree of consonance between their lived experiences and mine. The sharing yielded consonance in areas such as respect and support, or lack of them, amongst key stakeholders of the school communities.

The sharing and airing of our common feelings was also intended to instigate critical self-reflection, public discussion or debate, and further research into the scope of the problem. On the whole, the scope of this research has been limited to critical self-reflection of Asian migrant school practitioners. The research has implications for critical self-reflection by other teachers, particularly those who are teaching in cross-

cultural settings or those whose students come from multi-cultural ethnic backgrounds. Critical self reflection could have an implication for school students as well. Students could be guided in the process of critical self-reflection as a means of improving their school learning. In addition, criticalism could also be used as an approach to school teaching and learning.

The airing of our critically arrived conclusions regarding our feelings in this thesis and perhaps in other media that I am contemplating, could also have political implication in the form of public debate and discussion amongst stakeholders and interested parties about the plight of Asian migrant practitioners in WA schools. The public airing of our feelings is likely to attract the attention of non-migrant practitioners working alongside us or other stakeholders of the system, inviting them to respond to the reasons for our negative feelings. If they find our feelings to be ill founded it would help us in the correction of our biases. If they find our feelings to be legitimate, particularly amongst policy-makers, this would present them with a reminder that change is needed in order that the system can be more equitable, and thus more empowering, for people from different cultural backgrounds.

In terms of future study in the areas cross-cultural empowerment, this research might afford several opportunities, in particular, in the areas of critical self-reflection amongst students in the improvement of their school learning. Opportunities be afforded in areas of research associated with empowerment of teachers teaching in multi-cultural settings. Research about the use of criticalism as an approach to teaching and learning would also be a very meaningful undertaking for any school practitioner who has an interest in improving student learning.

Although this research involved the lived experiences of only a handful of Asian migrant school practitioners, it has transformed me personally in that it has shifted my positivist worldview into one which is more humanistic. It has 'enlightened' me and hence has emancipated me from an 'unfree' state of existence as a positivist unable to break free from the bondage of my own lived experience. In short, critical self-reflection has 'freed' me and, I believe, the reading of this critical self-reflection account would also engage others in a critical self-reflection process in 'freeing' themselves from whatever 'bondages' they might be experiencing. More specifically, this

passionate critical self-reflective account might serve as a check on the credibility of the WA Charter of Multiculturalism, in particular its cherished objectives of empowerment and full participation of all citizens in WA.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

memorandum

To	Dr Elisabeth Settelmaier, Education
From	A/Professor Stephan Millett, Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee
Subject	Protocol Approval HR 71/2007
Date	6 August 2007
Copy	Ka Hoo Law, Education A/Prof Rob Cavanagh, Education Graduate Studies Officer, Division of Humanities

Curtin 
University of Technology

Office of Research and Development

Human Research Ethics Committee

TELEPHONE 9266 2784
FACSIMILE 9266 3793
EMAIL hrec@curtin.edu.au

Thank you for your application submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for the project titled "*Teacher empowerment: An interpretive study of the experience of migrant teachers of Asian background in Western Australia*". Your application has been reviewed by the HREC and is approved.

- You are authorised to commence your research as stated in your proposal.
- The approval number for your project is **HR 71/2007**. Please quote this number in any future correspondence.
- Approval of this project is for a period of twelve months **03-07-2007** to **03-07-2008**. To renew this approval a completed Form B (attached) must be submitted before the expiry date **03-07-2008**.
- If you are a Higher Degree by Research student, data collection must not begin before your Application for Candidacy is approved by your Divisional Graduate Studies Committee.
- The following standard statement **must be included** in the information sheet to participants:

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number HR 71/2007). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. Its main role is to protect participants. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Applicants should note the following:

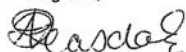
It is the policy of the HREC to conduct random audits on a percentage of approved projects. These audits may be conducted at any time after the project starts. In cases where the HREC considers that there may be a risk of adverse events, or where participants may be especially vulnerable, the HREC may request the chief investigator to provide an outcomes report, including information on follow-up of participants.

The attached **FORM B** should be completed and returned to the Secretary, HREC, C/- Office of Research & Development:

When the project has finished, or

- If at any time during the twelve months changes/amendments occur, or
- If a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs, or
- 14 days prior to the expiry date if renewal is required.
- An application for renewal may be made with a Form B three years running, after which a new application form (Form A), providing comprehensive details, must be submitted.

Regards,



pp A/Professor Stephan Millett
Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B



Department of Education and Training
Government of Western Australia

Your ref:
Our ref: D07/09357
Enquiries:

Mr Ka Hoo Law
22 Hillwater Promenade
BEECHBORO WA 6063

Dear Mr Law

Thank you for your completed application received 7 August 2007 to conduct research on Department of Education and Training sites.

The focus and outcomes of your research project titled, *Empowerment of Migrant Teachers in Western Australia*, are of interest to the Department, and I give permission for you to approach site-managers to invite their participation. However, it is a condition of approval that the results of this study are forwarded to the Department upon conclusion.

Consistent with Department policy, participation in your research project will be the decision of the particular schools invited to participate, and individual staff members.

Responsibility for quality control of ethics and methodology of the proposed research resides with the institution supervising the research. The Department notes a copy of a letter confirming that you have received ethical approval of your research protocol from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Any changes to the proposed methodology will need to be submitted for Department approval prior to implementation.

Please contact Mr Sean Fitzpatrick on (08) 9264 4068 or researchandpolicy@det.wa.edu.au if you have further enquiries.

Very best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely

NORMA JEFFERY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
POLICY, PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

14 August 2007

151 Royal Street, East Perth, Western Australia 6004

Appendix C

INFORMATION/INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Faculty of Education, Language
Studies and Social Work,
Curtin University of Technology,
Bentley WA6102.
Phone: 08 9266 2126

15 April 2007

Dear (name of participant),

Invitation to Participate in Research Study

You are kindly invited to participate in a research study on “Teacher empowerment: An interpretive study of the experience of migrant teachers of Asian background in Western Australia.” This study is a requirement leading to the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education in the Faculty of Education, Language Studies and Social Work of Curtin University of Technology. It will be conducted over a period of two years (July 2007 – July 2009). The details of this research study are as follows:

Aims

The aims of this research study include:

- To examine Asian migrant teachers’ beliefs about teacher empowerment;
- To explore Asian migrant teachers’ experiences of empowerment in WA government schools;
- To inquire into the degree to which schools are sensitive to the beliefs and needs of the Asian migrant teachers;
- To explore means of minimising potential barriers to empowerment among and with migrant teachers

Participation

Your participation in this research study will:

- Involve two interviews up to a maximum of one hour each at a mutually agreed venue and time; and informal discussions with me prior to or following interview sessions to clarify points of views or issues raised in the interviews or any matters which are directly linked to the research study; and
- Be completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time or any stage of the research without prejudice or negative consequences whatsoever.

In accordance to Curtin University of Technology Principles of Conduct from the NHMRC,

- You will not be identifiable by anyone as a participant in this study or any subsequent published materials as pseudonyms identifiable to the researcher only will be used.
- The information provided will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office for five years after the completion of this research and then destroyed.
- All information provided by you will be kept strictly confidential and only you have the access to the information provided.
- Permission will be sought from you to audiotape the interviews.
- This research will have the potential of enhancing our ability to operate as migrant teachers through sharing of our experiences through self reflection and exploring ways of improving our practices with minimum risk.
- Should you have any queries regarding this research study, you are welcome to contact my supervisor, Dr. E. Settelmaier, at Department of Education, Curtin University, Bentley WA6102 (Phone: 08 9266 2257).
- This research study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee.
- Should you have any concerns or wish to make a complain on ethical ground, please contact Human Ethics Committee (Secretary), Curtin University of Technology, Bentley WA6102 (phone: 08 9266 2784).

Thank you very much indeed for your very kind attention. I am looking forward to your participation in this study. Your participation will determine the success of this study and it will be highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature)

Geoffrey Law
Researcher (Ph.D. Student)

Appendix D

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Address:
Phone:
Email Address:

The researcher,
Faculty of Education, Language
Studies and Social Work,
Curtin University of Technology,
Bentley WA6102.

Dear Geoff

Consent to participate in the Research Study:

Title: Teacher empowerment: An interpretive study of the experience of migrant teachers of Asian background in Western Australia.

I, (Your name) have been informed and aware of and thus understood the purposes of the research study to be undertaken by you during the period July 2007 to July 2009 at my school. I have been given opportunities to ask questions about the research.

I hereby agree to participate in the study as outlined to me with the assurance that:

- Any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material;
- I can withdraw from the research study at any time without prejudice or negative consequences to me.

Yours sincerely,

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E

The Frankfurt Incident

On the fourth of September 2000, in the last year of the Clinton administration, a North Korean delegation heads from Europe toward the United Nations millennium summit in New York. The delegation includes the country's vice leader, Kim Yong Nam. In New York the delegation is supposed to have a reconciliatory meeting with the president of South Korea.

Changing their prior travel plans, they choose an American airline at Frankfurt Airport. While the North Koreans are waiting for the plane, the airline's security personnel notice them. Following their instructions for members of rogue states who do not have diplomatic immunity, they call out these people and thoroughly search them. The North Koreans are very, very angry and fly home instead of going to the U.N. summit. The incident immediately hits the world press.

The North Korean ambassador, Mr. Li, recounts his version of the story: U.S. aviation security officials came up to the delegation and performed hooligan acts: questioning them and checking their luggage and stripping them to do a body search. They justified this conduct by saying that North Korea was listed as a rogue state and that they had instruc-

tions from home to act as they did. Mr. Li concludes that the incident was purposely and insidiously created by the United States to hinder the reconciliation of the two Koreas, demonstrating that the U.S. is a rogue state itself.

A White House spokesman explains that because the delegation had changed its travel plans, the American airline personnel at Frankfurt Airport did not know who they were. They had done no more than follow the U.S. rules for rogue states, and the U.S. government had not been involved in the incident at all. The airline immediately apologizes and takes responsibility.

Various U.S. diplomats express regret about the incident. Four days later U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright sends a formal letter of apology to the Northern Korean foreign minister and receives a reply that could be called conciliatory. In this reply North Korea says it has noted the American apology and shall watch the future deeds of the Americans but also states that its sovereignty has been injured and that "the Democratic People's Republic of Korea values its sovereignty like its life and soul."

The two Koreas resume their talks.

Source: Hofstede, G. J. Pedersen, P. B. Hofstede, G. (2002) Worlds apart in one village. In *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*. Maine, USA: Intercultural Press, Inc. (p. 3).