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**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR
AT THE TEACHERS' DAY RECEPTION
AT THE ISTANA ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1982 AT 6.00 PM**

When I was asked to speak to this gathering today, I found myself in a quandary. First, I do not think it is really possible to communicate with people by speaking from a prepared text. No good teacher would do it, for he would bore his class to tears.

On the other hand, you have to contend with the media. You risk being misquoted or misreported if you speak off-the-cuff. So I decided to conduct an experiment. I concentrated for awhile, and imagined myself speaking to you off-the-cuff, and personally took down what I found myself in imagination telling you. The result is curious. What I have before me does not read like a normal text, and when I do refer to my so-called text, I need not pretend that it is one. You can tell me at the end whether I have been able to communicate, or whether I have failed.

Reading out from a text-book to children is a travesty of teaching. In fact, a wise educator once said: "The first thing to learn about teaching is that nothing can be taught". In other words, a student is not a passive recipient of information imparted by a teacher. Learning is an experience. Every lesson must be an experience for the student. For learning has to be participatory. Every student must be an involved participant in a lesson. This, in a nutshell, is the modern scientific perception of the learning process. And it is this perception which is behind the phenomenal development in many countries of what is known as educational technology.

Only an involved student learns. A non-involved student is no more than a block of wood. Our students are not blocks of wood. They are budding human beings. Their bodies, minds,

spirits and /2.

spirits and emotions must all be aroused, engaged and mobilised if learning is to be a complete and rounded affair.

I grant that most of our teachers are familiar with these theories, but fine theories are not translated into equally fine practice. There have been impediments to the translation of good theory into good practice. In the past, these impediments were largely of an institutional nature, and were inevitable. They are no longer inevitable now.

Let me explain. In 1959, the first fully elected Government of Singapore had to deal with other priorities. Universal primary education did not exist. It had to be provided. School buildings had to be mass-produced. They mushroomed all over the place. And teachers had to be mass-produced. Standards of recruitment declined. The mass-produced teachers in turn mass-produced students. Inevitably, the standards achieved were lower than those achieved now. The pass rates were lower. The failure rates were higher.

The explanation for all this is that it was an evolutionary necessity. After all, think of all the enormous evolutionary wastage which occurred, before the first human beings walked the earth. A price had to be paid for rapid development. Whether it is students or manufactured goods, mass unskilled or semi-skilled production results in shoddy work, poor quality, and low value added.

Let me give you an analogy from our economic history. Our first problem in 1959 was to deal with mass unemployment. Jobs had to be created, all kinds of jobs, in their thousands and tens of thousands, to mop up our unemployed. But our workers were unskilled. So were our managers, who were deficient in management skills. So the Government encouraged labour-intensive industries of all kinds. And the necessary jobs were created.

This was only the first step. Unskilled workers in labour-intensive industries meant low wages. And with low wages, workers could not afford to rent or buy homes. So we began to climb up the next few rungs of the evolutionary ladder. We began to train our workers in higher skills, so that they could operate higher technology, produce higher value added goods, increase

profit margins /3.

profit margins and increase wages. As earnings increased, so were CPF savings increased. And with increased savings, we were able to provide HDB flats for our workers. All the new HDB townships which we know today, and which house some 70 per cent of our working population, sprang up all over the island.

All this was not done in a day. It took us more than 20 years to arrive at where we are today. And today we talk about progressively higher skills, quality control circles, zero defect work, higher productivity, higher value added, better teamwork, improved new generation HDB flats, an MRT system, and so on. In short, a qualitative transformation has taken place in our society. I can assure you it was no easy transformation.

Primitive preconceptions had to be shattered. Attitudes had to be transformed, incentives and rewards devised and revised to secure maximum performance. It was a colossal educational process. At least in one small field I myself was closely involved. My training as a teacher helped. In fact, together with people like your Minister for Education, the Prime Minister and his colleagues, we were all engaged in a vast educational effort. But we did not teach in class-rooms. I myself had to conceive of the whole labour movement as a gigantic educational workshop. Fortunately, I had colleagues who knew what we were trying to do.

I will give you an example. Collective bargaining is today a very sophisticated affair. Managements, trade unionists and government representatives sit down together and discuss the state of the economy. They study charts, graphs, statistics of all kinds, and then come to a consensus on wage increases and the like which the economy can bear. People have been trained to think of the nation as a whole, and not only of their narrow sectional interests. But this was not the case 20 or 30 years ago. Let me tell you how the five month-long strike in the old Singapore Traction Company began in 1954. First of all, the union's claims were formulated in the most extraordinary fashion. Somebody says, "Well, you know, let's come to the bonus. How much shall we ask for?" and somebody says, "Well, why not three weeks?" Somebody else says, "Well, never mind, make it four weeks". No study of balance sheets, nothing of the kind. And this is how the negotiations began. All 25 men in the central committee of the union came along - Chinese,

Indians, /4.

Indians, Malays. They were in their uniforms, bus conductors and drivers, and all smelling of perspiration. And poor Mr Wilson, the General Manager of the STC, who knows excellent Malay, he sits red-faced on the other side of the table, while I am supposed to be the spokesman. And the President of the Union was one Sathdeo Singh, a fierce, six-footed, burly chap, who used to live around Upper Dickson Road. He says to me, "Okay, Devan Nair. Awak chakap sama ini babi punya orang. Jangan chakap banyak. Dia mahu kasi -kah, ta'mahu? Chakap sama dia." So, meanwhile poor Mr Wilson, who knows excellent Malay, goes red in the face. He asks, "Well, what did the President say?" I reply, "Well, Mr Wilson, he wants clarification on your response to item 4 of claim no.2, and so on". And old Sathdeo Singh starts again. "Okay? Sudah translate? Sudah chakap? Okay. Lagi chakap sama ini binatang orang puteh" says he. Very strong that way, you see? With the result, of course, that we had a strike for five months - no public transport for five months.

So you see, it was a long road we have travelled.

The same long road has been travelled in our school system. Twenty years ago, the top priority was to provide universal primary education for our children. It was a huge administrative problem. There was little time for professionalism. No one thought of classifying children into quick starters, average starters, slow starters, non-starters, and so forth.

But today our school system has come of age. The accent today is on professionalism. The objectives of education have been widened and deepened beyond all recognition. The teacher is no longer regarded as a hastily recruited and hastily trained automaton, to impart the three Rs to other automatons. Our schools are no longer regarded as a huge administrative headache for a bureaucratic Ministry of Education to handle.

Often unintelligible circulars from the Ministry of Education have given place to a new set of objectives, standards and priorities. Our teachers have yet to digest the new demands made on them.

Let us take objectives first. The over-all objective is the the all-round development of our human resources. By which we mean

not only /5.

not only equipping our children with paper qualifications. On the contrary, education is seen as being simultaneously a question of mental culture, physical culture, emotional culture and moral culture, leading to a well-balanced and rounded human being and citizen.

We recognise that our children are different from each other. They have varying abilities and capacities which have to be catered for. Not everybody is equally well endowed. There are the bright, the average and the slower pupils. And we cannot afford to neglect our retarded or handicapped children either. Everybody must be trained to lead useful and productive lives, according to the measure of his or her capacity.

If we are to develop our human resources, which are the only resources we have, all our pupils, the bright, the average as well as below-average must be provided with opportunities to develop to their fullest potential.

To ignore our brightest students in the name of some imbecile egalitarian creed would be criminal social folly. In most advanced countries, like the United States, Britain and Western Europe and even in the Soviet Union, special programmes for specially gifted children are consciously and deliberately made available.

To ignore our less well endowed children would be equal folly. In fact they require more specialised attention, more resort to audio-visual aids and so on. They also require specially trained and gifted teachers.

It is educational folly to stifle our slow learners by setting for them unrealistically high targets. They should not be made to gallop through the same course and at the same pace as the brightest pupils.

I would think that teaching an 'E' Class is a greater professional challenge than teaching an 'A' Class. I was therefore distressed to learn that some teachers feel discouraged when they teach slow learners, and are frustrated when their pupils do not achieve "Good" results. But let me put it this way. A teacher who helps a student to improve, for example, his Mathematics from a

grade of 30 per cent to 50 per cent has achieved as much, if not more, than another teacher who has helped his pupils to improve from 90 per cent to 95 per cent.

If children of varying abilities and capacities are to be catered for, clearly we require different syllabi, different sets of learning materials, and different teaching methods. A uniform system, syllabus and teaching aids would be disastrous. Flexibility and adaptation of teaching methods and aids to meet varying needs, and not uniformity, must become the new significant professional watchwords for teachers.

This is what is meant by the professional three Is for teachers: Independence, Initiative and Innovation. The quality of a school, the results it achieves for its students, cannot be determined or decreed by the Ministry of Education. They deal with files up there in Kay Siang Road. But in your schools and classrooms you deal with living, breathing, feeling, thinking, budding human beings, with incalculable potentials for good or evil, for success or failure. And if you really want to do well as a teacher, you will have to develop independent thinking.

The Ministry can at best provide no more than broad guidelines. And these guidelines should never be regarded as mandatory or infallible. They are not. It is the teachers who must take the initiative to make necessary adjustments to guidelines or curriculum packages to suit the needs of a particular class. For example, it may be better for a teacher to teach a class of slow pupils 60 per cent of the syllabus and have them learn their lessons well, than to rush through 100 per cent of the syllabus without the pupils learning anything.

Again, innovation in introducing new teaching techniques, new teaching aids and new activities in the class must come from the teachers themselves. Do not look over your shoulders at the Ministry of Education, for you will look in vain.

Incidentally, let us not go back to the days when school inspectors were no better than terrorists. If there are any such, they ought to be sacked. Inspectors, if they are to justify their existence at all, must prove themselves as the professional allies and friends of teachers. They should be mentors, not tormentors.

All this is explicit as well as implicit in the new approach to education in Singapore today. Ever higher professional skills need to be acquired and put into practice, and teachers are the key digits.

Religious and moral education instruction materials are currently being prepared. But ask yourselves one thing. Do you really believe, does anyone in his senses really believe, that our young Singaporeans are all going to become morally upright because teachers will soon be expected to dole out doses of morality and religion through textbooks?

Morality, desirable values like courage, consideration for others, unselfishness, loyalty to one's family and fellow citizens, honesty, integrity, and all the whole host of desirable virtues and standards cannot be conveyed by conventional means through conventional and boring textbooks. Only inspired teachers can make moral values and standards come alive, as inspired parents and teachers had done before them in the great traditional civilisations of the past.

All children love stories. And every teacher needs to be a good story teller. Now good story tellers do not put their pupils to sleep, whether it is Confucianism, Christian virtues, Islamic virtues, Buddhism or Hindu culture, there exist countless fables, legends, tales, proverbs of all lands and climes, enshrining all the desirable virtues and values which we seek to promote in our society. So please do not inflict on our children in Secondary Three and Secondary Four abstruse dissertations on metaphysics, morality, religious architecture, and so on. You will only bore them to death. The role of the teacher and the kind of textbooks he uses for moral instruction and religious studies must have only one objective: evoke higher thirsts and higher appetites in our children through living and vibrant tales and fables.

Miracles of teacher-pupil communication can occur only if teachers know the knack. Let me give you an example. The rivers of Pahang, Johore and elsewhere in Malaysia are infested with crocodiles - terribly predatory reptiles. Centuries of bitter experience coined for the Malays a very telling proverb: "Ayer tenang, jangan di-sangka tiada buaya". (The water is calm, but don't believe that

there are no crocodiles.) Most Malay children in Malaysia know this proverb, and they don't go fooling about in calm but crocodile-infested waters. I too knew this proverb as a boy living in Muar. Believe me, I was never tempted to swim in the Muar river, even in reaches which were considered safe.

Imagine the numerous things we could vivify for our children through this proverb, for example, in current affairs. You tell your class this proverb, and then say: "So you believe that because ASEAN and Southeast Asia are calm at the moment, that there are no crocodiles? But look at Vietnam and the Thai-Kampuchean border. There are crocodiles, only they are military and political crocodiles." And you can build a whole lesson on this one proverb.

As in literature and language, so in moral instruction and religious studies, the use of language must be quite distinct from the use of language in the science subjects. In physics, chemistry and biology, language has a primarily functional use. It is used to impart information, facts, instructions. And textbooks in these subjects are intended for the eyes, and not so much for the ears. But I am seized with consternation when I find a teacher teaching language, literature or oral English, as though language too was meant primarily for the eyes. But in these areas, aural comprehension and participation plus visual comprehension go together, with aural comprehension and participation predominating.

Poetry, for example, is not meant for the eyes. It is meant for the ears. The same goes for music. Facts are primary in the sciences. But ideas and sound values are much more important in the teaching of language, literature and moral instruction.

You want an illustration? The telephone directory is full of facts. But it does not contain a single idea. Now, you cannot treat Macbeth, or the Sermon on the Mount like a telephone directory. The drama, the passion and tragedy of Macbeth, the sublimity of the Sermon on the Mount, must be brought out startlingly alive through quite other means.

I will give you another illustration. I recently visited a class where a lesson in oral English was going on. And I

remembered reading years ago a very good British book on the effective teaching of oral English. I wrote on the blackboard what apparently was a simple and bald statement of fact. "This is my mother's black cat." I asked the class what that sentence meant. The answer was that it simply meant what it said. I proved to them that this was not so. Depending on which word is stressed in that simple sentence, it can in fact refer to six different situations. Let me illustrate.

1. "This is my mother's black cat."
Not that black cat. Not the other. But this.
2. "This is my mother's black cat."
Who said it wasn't? A quite different situation.
3. "This is my mother's black cat."
Not your mother's. Not his mother's. But my mother's.
4. This is my mother's black cat."
You see, my father has a black cat.
My uncle has a black cat. Others too have black cats.
But this is my mother's.
5. "This is my mother's black cat."
My mother has a brown cat, a white cat and so on.
But this is her black cat.
6. "This is my mother's black cat."
My mother has other black pets. She has a black dog,
a black rabbit and so on. But this is her black cat.

I could feel in my bones that the class had come alive.

The striving for excellence, for quality, is not confined to our factories, offices, ports and other places of employment. Professional excellence is equally crucial in our classrooms. Indeed, the success of our efforts to promote excellence in the quality of adult working life, will depend very much upon the success of our teachers in our classrooms.

I am not suggesting that our teachers have so far been a worthless lot. Compared to pupils in other countries, Singapore pupils have done well. A good deal of the credit for this goes to our teachers. I have no reason to doubt that the generality of our teachers are dedicated and efficient. I am merely suggesting that we can do a great deal better by and for our children. They are our future. They are Singapore's future. And they deserve the best we can give them. And the best we can offer them can be very much improved if we become professional in the real sense of the term.

How to obtain higher professional standards? Ask ourselves continually the following questions. Can our teaching strategies be further improved? How can we make our lessons more effective? Are our tests relevant and valid? Are we making sufficient use of modern educational technology? Are we merely imparting information to our pupils, or are we encouraging, inspiring and guiding them, to open the doors of knowledge for themselves. Teachers should not accept slipshod or professionally unsound work, whether by themselves or by their colleagues.

You should not think that you have learned all there is to learn when you have graduated from the Institute of Education. Indeed, as modern educational doctrines and technology advance, you may well have to unlearn a good deal of what you had learnt from the Institute of Education.

Keep constantly abreast of educational developments elsewhere. Share your own experiences and insights with teachers in other schools. Formal courses, workshops, seminars and conferences enhance professional knowledge and skills.

Informal means of professional development are equally important. On-the-job experience and guidance by senior professionals are two examples. Read professional journals and books, both from here and elsewhere. Let us learn from the experiences of others and their innovative ideas.

The real test of a good lesson is this. Has it been an "experience" for the pupil. If it has been an "experience" it can only mean one thing. You have given of yourself. Your reward - job satisfaction! Because of you, some or several children will

have become better informed and better motivated students. And what greater spiritual reward can any teacher expect?

I intend to practise what I preach. The late President Sheares used to leave the Istana two or three times a week, go to the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, and conduct free operations for poor female patients.

Beginning 1983, I intend to ask Dr Goh permission to take a couple of classes a week in language and literature, and perhaps moral instruction as well. I won't choose a class of bright students. I would like to deal with average students. And on Teachers' Day next year, you may expect to hear more from me. Like the late President, there can be no charge for my services.

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