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PAPER PRESENTED BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, MINISTER-IN-CHARGE
OF THE INDUSTRIAL TRAINING BOARD, AT THE SINGAPORE MALAY
TEACHERS' UNION'S SEMINAR ON "NEW CHALLENGES IN
SINGAPORE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM" ON WEDNESDAY,
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NEW CHALLENGES IN SINGAPORE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

NEW CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATION

The challenges we face as a young nation are very clear: to continue to earn a living in a rapidly changing world and therefore a world of instability and, particularly, economic uncertainty; to build upon what we have been fortunate enough to achieve in the past two decades; to grow as a society we want to live in and be proud to leave our children with a harmonious gracious living that makes all of us together Singaporeans. We have proved ourselves to be a viable nation despite the meagre endowments that nature has given us by honestly recognising our limitations and taking full advantage of whatever we have. We must now, with this same frankness and determination, not only continue to prove our viability as a nation and as an economy, but also uplift the quality of life in our society to make it even more meaningful and worthwhile, so that at the end of the day we can say that we have done what we have had to do. This is the challenge for us as a society.

Because we have no natural resources to ensure our economic standing in the first place, we have overwhelmingly to depend on our human resources. Because we have no control over many factors that have a strong influence on our economy, we have to develop these human resources of ours along certain lines so that we can plan for contingencies like the oil crisis, the world economic crisis and changes in the world scenario; we have to develop ourselves into a hardworking, resilient, capable people

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who have no illusions that life is a glossy advertisement and you can buy success in a bottle for a few cents or a few dollars without any effort. This is the challenge for education.

The challenge that educators must face is how to take care of our children and bring them up to have a part in our Singapore context - to prepare them to maintain and develop our society from where we adults will leave off. This is the role of education in the social and economic development of Singapore. It is a difficult role. With successful family planning we have reduced the annual live-birth of 61,775 in 1960 to 38,807 last year. Obviously this reduction is necessary because the whole of Singapore is only 58,000 hectares (224 square miles) and we run the risk of overcrowdedness. Yet at the same time we have only 2.3 million from which to draw all the leaders at the top, all the second echelon executives and the whole, broad base of workers. This is really a very tall order if you think carefully about it. Human beings are not machine parts you can mass produce and slot, in at different places in the whole machinery. But all the same, we must ensure that everyone is effectively, positively employed and occupied. Otherwise we will have unemployment, no income for the family, no food, clothing and shelter, and children not taken care of - a social burden we can ill afford. Or else we have to import experts or workers to fill the jobs that Singaporeans cannot or do not want to take up. To some extent this may be unavoidable, first because we need to import expertise and second because the unskilled or semi-skilled workers are willing to work and hardy enough to take it. But our first and main responsibility is to our own citizens and it is ridiculous for a percentage of them to remain unemployed in jobs that they can but are not willing to do because they expect something better while we, on the other hand, provide outsiders with an income and a place in our country.

So our education system must succeed in providing us with the necessary manpower required to fill the top leadership positions, the high-calibre second echelon of executives and the broad base of willing workers. This is a basic objective of education, so that we can continue to be economically viable. More than this, all of them have to be fully educated, not merely literate or intelligent or able to work, in and to our Singapore society. This means, first of all, a commitment to Singapore.

Singaporeans must have a bigger stake here as I believe more and more already do. They must not just decide to suddenly "up and go" when the chips are down. They must feel deeply that this is home -- both for themselves and their children. Commitment also means that they each take it as a personal responsibility and are prepared to make sacrifices to ensure that their home is a good home, secure, well-run, productive, conducive for growth, cohesive and harmonious.

ADJUSTMENTS TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

At the very outset, our education policy had been formulated with social and economic development in mind. This included the fullest development of individual potentialities with the purpose of ensuring the collective development and welfare of our democratic society; love for freedom, truth and justice; respect for fundamental human rights; racial, religious and cultural appreciation and tolerance; all other aspects involved in building our nation, particularly loyalty and patriotism. The provisions included universal education, free primary education, free parental choice of language stream, equal treatment of the 4 official languages, bilingualism, emphasis on vocational and technical education, a balanced education with the development of knowledge and skills necessary for economic development, social and civic values and consciousness, health education and services as well as extra-curricular activities to ensure a healthy and robust society.

At the opening of the First Orientation Seminar of the Industrial Training Board (ITB) on "Rationale for and Implications of the Revised Secondary Education System" early this year, I mentioned how our education system has come a long way from the one we inherited when we first achieved independence. The Government built up the educational structure, set up the Adult Education Board (AEB), initiated important developments in vocational education and made industrial training a major instrument of economic policy. In 1968, a Technical Education Department (TED) was set up in the Ministry of Education to develop and administer both the vocational schools as well as technical education in standard schools. It began shaping up industrial training until, in 1973, the Industrial Training Board (ITB) was established to take over and extend TED responsibilities to further promote and develop industrial training programmes to suit the demands and

needs of industries. Recently, it has been announced that the AEB will be merged with ITB into a single authority for even better coordination and provisions for our citizens.

I also mentioned that our Government recognises and accepts that pupils have different aptitudes. There are those who can achieve a fair amount of success in academic pursuits. But there are also others, less academically inclined, who have difficulty with the academic school curriculum. To insist that the latter group continue with the academic programme would be tantamount to subjecting them to severe and unnecessary strain and also denying them the chance to have their other abilities and aptitudes recognised and developed.

The problem of how best to cater for the different aptitudes of our young people is one that has occupied our planners for some time. On the one hand, there are shortages of workers in various categories and manpower projections indicate future imbalances between supply and demand. On the other, there are the many pupils who, despite showing little academic aptitude, keep being automatically promoted each year eventually to fail when they take the Primary School Leaving Examinations or General Certificate Education Ordinary Level Examinations.

With this in mind, the Government has introduced two adjustments since last year - the Basic Course in the Primary School System and its attendant Junior Trainee Scheme (JTS), and the Revised Secondary Education System (RSES). Both of these, when fully implemented, will broaden the scope of our education system to provide not only for those who are able to follow the normal school curriculum, but also those whose abilities mainly lie outside this curriculum. The Government in this way aims to find a place for everyone up to the age of 18 years, - in a school, training institutions or extension education centre, learning skills that would equip him for adult life, or in some form of supervised employment. Vocational training will be accorded parity with academic education in importance.

The Government does not accept that children who do not make the grade in academic schools will be failures in life. They must be given an opportunity to succeed in something else. We are giving them this opportunity. The extent of our commitment to

their future can be seen, in the fact that we are spending about two and a half times (\$2,000 as against \$870) more to train a child in vocational skills than to keep him in school. We would not be spending this money simply to produce failures.

Another significant adjustment in the system involves the Pre-university level. Several considerations have had to be taken into account. The first involves the use of English for our commercial, economic and technological development. In order to import Western expertise, upgrade our technological sophistication and apply them for our economic progress, as well as to have economic and trade relations with the advanced countries of the West, we have to make use of English and develop our skills in it up to the university level. We have an advantage here because English has been steadily stressed from the past, whereas other languages like German, French and Japanese have just recently been introduced for our secondary school pupils. The second consideration is that students from the non-English stream schools are at a disadvantage compared to their English stream counterparts when competing for degrees in the University of Singapore, or for jobs in the private sector. It is, therefore, only fair to make provisions for these pupils earlier, that is, at the Pre-university level, so that they would not have to handle both the content load of the university courses while upgrading their English at the same time. Thus adjustments at the Pre-university level have been made for non-English stream pupils to opt for English as a medium of instruction in 2 or 3 years, with specially tailored English programmes to help them. In addition, and in keeping with the rationale for using English, courses in Economics, Science and Mathematics are being conducted in English from this year in all Pre-university classes. At the same time, more emphasis is being placed on bilingualism, including admission requirements into Pre-university and Junior College courses of a GCE 'O' level Grade 6 for the first language and a Grade 6 for the second language in 1979, and a Grade 7 for the second language in 1980.

THE ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF ITB

The role of the Industrial Training Board (ITB) is to centralise, coordinate and intensify industrial training. A statutory board will enable industry and labour to participate

more fully /6.

more fully towards common goals. It will have more flexibility in an area where slowness to respond to changing conditions can result in high training wastage on the one hand and critical skill shortages on the other. A board will also be better able to deal with the problems of disseminating the right kind of conceptions about industrial training. While industrial training is primarily the responsibility of industry, it is imperative to ensure that national interests are served. A major function of the board will be to encourage industry to play its proper role in the national industrial training effort.

The ITB is thus primarily concerned with training skilled workers to support Singapore's planned economic growth. Through its programmes it aims to develop a broad base of workers equipped with the skills required in modern industry. In certain areas where demand for artisan skills exists, notably in the construction industry, the Board also conducts courses to meet this need.

The Board's major activities cover:-

- a) full-time courses for school-leavers;
- b) part-time courses for industrial workers;
- c) specially tailored ad hoc courses for industries;
- d) the promotion and supervision of apprenticeship training schemes;
- e) trade testing and certification;
- f) research and manpower development; and
- g) the Junior Trainee Scheme.

The Board works closely with the Economic Development Board and the Ministry of Finance (Development Division) to establish the broad skilled workers requirements of the economy, both in terms of numbers and trade areas. These projections determine the nature of the courses run and the size of intakes into ITB institutions. The Board also maintains continuous contact, through meetings, visits, seminars and discussions, with individual companies and trade associations. Its officers go out to industry regularly and systematically discuss training needs. As a matter of fact, ITB reflects the significance of and the stress placed on tripartite representation comprising members from the Government, the

industries and the labour movement. This mechanism for constant consultation and the pooling of resources ensures the success of ITB in providing training programmes and syllabuses relevant to industrial requirements and beneficial to workers. ITB has 10 Trade Advisory Committees on the Applied Arts, Automotive, Construction, Electrical, Electronics, Fashion Arts, Hotel, Metal, Printing and Woodbased Trades. Members comprise professionals from the industrial and public sectors to ensure communication and feedback between industry and the Board to examine and review the facilities and programmes for industrial training, and recommend improvements in them as well as advise on the training of the Board's staff and standards of certification in each trade.

A research unit supports such consultation and feedback by conducting action studies for review or evaluation purposes as well as to update planning data and determine new and changing requirements.

Seminar participants would by now know or have been involved directly or indirectly with the revised Primary and Secondary Education Systems. Primary school pupils who are over-aged for their grade levels and are not academically inclined, having failed three times during their school career, are now automatically channelled to one of the four levels of the Basic Course Programme, Basic One to Basic Four, affecting Primary Three to Primary Six pupils in the abovementioned groups. The curriculum prepares pupils for the world of work by developing basic literacy, numeracy and manipulative skills. The inculcation of proper work attitudes, particularly in Basic Four, stresses work ethics, work discipline and work safety. In addition, technical workshop practice for boys and domestic science lessons for girls are included.

Basic Four pupils may opt to come under the Junior Trainee Scheme run by ITB specially to place them in supervised employment or on-the-job training for a period of three years or until they reach the age of 18, whichever is earlier. In addition to working 36 hours a week, they undergo an extension education programme of 6 hours in one day of the week run by the Adult Education Board. The programme aims to maintain and consolidate the level of literacy and numeracy acquired in the Basic Course and includes languages, arithmetic and social and civic education. Junior

Trainees are paid by their employers, even during the day they attend classes, and are entitled to annual leave and other employment benefits according to law.

ITB is also promoting formal training schemes in co-operation with employers' organisations and firms to enable Junior Trainees to acquire skills above the level of operatives. For the 1977 batch of Junior Trainees alone, 30% have been employed in training schemes in areas like pipefitting, cane-furniture making and building construction. These schemes include 3 to 6 months full-time institutional training at a vocational institute, followed by on-the-job training at the workplace, and leading to Certificates of Competency. By the end of January 1978, 2,355 Junior Trainees (91%) have been employed in 198 firms, including 5 training schemes.

With the abolition of automatic promotion in the secondary schools as well this year, continual and semestral assessments, promotion, retention and channelling have been instituted. Secondary school pupils who are not academically inclined will now have the opportunity to enter into full-time vocational training, either in the ITB training institutes or the AEB commercial centres. The ITB institutes offer training in a wide range of trades on a part-time or full-time basis. In all 47 trades are included.

Courses in ITB's vocational institutes are conducted at three levels: the Industrial Technician Certificate (ITC), the Trade and the Artisan levels. ITC courses cater for production management and supervisory skills development, with emphasis on theoretical content. Trade courses lead to the National Trade Certificate Grades 3 and 2 (NTC 3 and NTC 2). The NTC 3 is for those who have acquired the basic skills and knowledge of the trade, while the NTC 2 is awarded to those who have reached the standard of a fully competent craftsman. These courses have a heavy practical bias. From NTC 2, the industrial worker can progress to the NTC 1 or master craftsman level. Artisan courses provide more narrowly specialised, short-term training in specific skills to fit industrial requirements.

Enrolment figures at the end of January 1978, including

part-time and /9.

part-time and full-time trainees, stood at 1850 (17%) ITC, 491 (4%) NTC 2, 8,168 (74%) NTC 3 and 588 (5%) Artisan. Since the Board's inception, up to the same date, it has awarded 1,921 ITC, 2,129 NTC 2, 13,347 NTC 3 and 2,018 Artisan Certificates.

THE ROLES OF TEACHERS

As our education system is being constantly refined by these changes recently made as well as others that will come in the future, so also must the teaching profession be refined and upgraded in terms of professionalism. This is essential for achieving national goals in the midst of world and societal changes. Teachers are in a privileged position to mould the lives of future adult Singaporeans. In being thus privileged, they have very heavy responsibilities too. Obviously a lot of sacrifices are called for as they give fully of themselves to the proper upbringing and education of the pupils under their charge, to ensure that we can meet the challenges we face as a society.

First and foremost, teachers must be fully committed to their calling. This means that they must have the right type of concern for their pupils whose growth and development they must supervise with constant vigilance and care. This often calls for the large expenditure of energy in raising them; the exercise of patience, sympathy and understanding; the adoption of a firm attitude in correcting them; the maintenance of a close rapport with them so as to remain approachable; the readiness to go out of the way to help the least among these pupils.

To effectively help and exercise concern for pupils, teachers need to know a great deal about children and how to handle them best; they must know each pupil well individually; they must know their potentials, weaknesses and aspirations; they must know the system and its recent refinements thoroughly; they must also have a good grasp of the subjects they are teaching and read a lot on and about these areas to keep up to date; they must keep in close touch with and be able to understand the larger context in which they are working, that is, our society and the world at large and the trends and directions being taken. But they must not merely impart this knowledge of theirs. They have to filter and analyse and apply this knowledge for the benefit of

their pupils. This, in turn calls for a constant-upgrading of professional skills, an attitude of continuous learning, in and for the education of their pupils.

However, I am not for one moment advocating that teachers should be know-alls and perfect. Like everybody else, they have their limitations too! It is enough that they give of their best, within their limitations and, of course, without going to the other extreme of losing total confidence and letting things and themselves slide. It is important, therefore, that teachers cooperate among themselves and with other professionals as well as parents, their superior officers and the children under their charge, so as to arrive at the best possible combination of effort. For instance, teachers must know where to go for help in carrying out their professional duties. When they talk shop, it is to improve their abilities rather than to gossip and grouse, to have a positive and confident outlook rather than to work up their frustrations or self pity. The roles of the teachers are very difficult to fulfil. As I see it, there are only two kinds of teachers who find them easy. The first group comprises those who have teaching in their blood. They know exactly what to do. Their very presence commands the respect of pupils, yet these children feel so comfortable with them that they look upon such teachers as friends and will do anything for them. Teaching life becomes easy. All the hard work becomes part and parcel of the day or the week, which passes all too quickly, and each completed task has a buoying effect, making the next seem more manageable. Such teachers sleep easy too!

The other group comprises those who find teaching easy because it does not occupy or bother their minds at all. They go through half the day mechanically, more preoccupied with what to do the rest of the day and night or the weekends and holidays. They do not even bother to prepare for the next lesson, all they need to do being to ask a colleague as they walk to class what next to teach. These, however, are not teachers. They merely use teaching as a cover, as a convenience. Their pupils know them soon enough. They cannot draw sustenance from youngsters the way the first group does. They dread going to class and facing their pupils. Their level of tolerance is low and they draw the line thick and clear between what they think they are paid to do and

what would be most unreasonable to ask them to do. They snigger, at those who work hard for the sake of the pupils and the school, but are only too eager to pass more of the buck to them. Teaching is easy, but not on their conscience, when it occasionally pricks them.

For the rest of our teachers, playing their roles is very difficult, for it requires a great deal of effort and sacrifice. First they have to learn to cope with many children and many duties, not least, their duties at home. Then, they have to learn to cope with changes in themselves, other people, including their colleagues and their pupils. They have also to cope with adjustments in the system, like the revised Primary and Secondary Education Systems. These adjustments require them to perform new tasks or to carry out old ones in different ways: they have to be more systematic and careful with their pupils' records; their marking and pupil assessment will have to count for more; they have to keep track of their pupils' progress more intently to decide in the end, one way or another, whether in all fairness one pupil may benefit from extra or accelerated help to go beyond the class, while another definitely requires another year at the same level, and yet another cannot proceed - and so advise the principal in his decision to promote, retain or channel out the pupil. Teachers will have to guide and counsel their pupils more than ever, especially because of the new provisions which may conflict with their aspirations or the aspirations of their parents. Sometimes pupils need the help of their teachers to bridge the gap that has grown between parents and their children. Thus, when meeting parents, teachers have to play the role of advising them on their children's abilities and weaknesses and how these affect or will affect the pupils' future. This would include advice on the future course to be chosen, especially if the pupil is to be channelled to the vocational stream. In all this, the teacher must deal with both pupils and parents tactfully and sympathetically, calling on all his knowledge and powers to help every individual pupil to find his best potential and direction. And all this is apart from, and over and above, the instructions in and out of class, the covering of syllabuses, the imbuing of the right attitudes towards self, others, society; towards learning, living the present and preparing for the future.

It is not surprising to find the teacher's tasks, like any other worthwhile set of tasks, difficult to perform. Nor can the ability to perform them be acquired overnight. It takes long, arduous years to develop into Master Teachers, and then mainly in specific areas, not in everything.

THE ROLES OF TEACHERS' UNIONS

What roles can Teachers' Unions then play in all this?

I trust that the deliberations during this Seminar will focus on this theme. I trust also that the theme will receive wide and in-depth treatment. In view of this, I would like to make a few suggestions which I hope may help in your deliberations.

As it exists today, the present situation in relation to service conditions would not serve as a means for vigorous discussion. Improvements have been made and are continually looked into so as to attract and retain high calibre teachers. And, in addition to this, there are incentives and benefits which teachers already enjoy.

At this juncture, it seems more to the point for Teachers' Unions to emphasise the professional upgrading of their members with more vigour. In view of this I would like to put forward some suggestions which Seminar participants might wish to discuss.

- a) What have Unions achieved so far in the light of their objectives? What more can be achieved?
- b) What are the professional needs of members and what have or have not been met - by whom and how?
- c) What is the relationship of Unions and Union activities with the present education system and how can members actively contribute to the profession in regard to the system?
- d) What programme of action would Unions be able to carry out to effectively upgrade the professionalism of members and other teachers in relation to the present tasks to be performed?

