THE PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS AT THE GET-TOGETHER OF THE SINGAPORE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION, HELD AT MING PALACE ON 10TH JULY, 1971

In the 12 years since 1959, Chinese schools and their teachers have, like the rest of Singapore, gone through a great transformation. They are now paid the same salaries as the English school teachers. Government Chinese schools are as well equipped as English-language schools.

But some of the good features of the old Chinese schools have changed, and not for the better. From a 6-day week, because of parity with the English schools, Chinese schools have become five-and-a-half days. This was a mistake.

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Now a new generation of Chinese school teachers, trained at the T.T.C., are coming out. They are very different from the poorly-paid and hardworking teachers of the old private Chinese schools, unaided by any grants from the government. Perhaps in place of devotion to duty, we can expect more competence and professionalism in our T.T.C. and university trained teachers.

Your committee and your members should be concerned in the problems of how to improve teaching methods.

For example, from personal knowledge, I know that old and out of date teaching methods are still used. There is too much "mo xie", the memorising and reproduction of whole passages, instead of the written composition (zuo wen). I know that written compositions require more time and effort to correct. "Mo xie" requires only the mechanical pointing out of where the student has been wrong. But it is through correcting the student's own composition that better progress in the command of the language is made.

Moreover, in many schools, students are asked blindly to memorise and reproduce model answers to set questions. Marks are given for accuracy in reproducing these model answers. The emphasis surely must be on understanding what is being taught, on digesting the knowledge and reasoning, and on expressing ideas in the student's own words.

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I know this is difficult when one teacher has 40 students in a class to look after. We must recognise these shortcomings and correct them. By all means memorise the frequently used proverbs and the famous passages of the classics. But learning through memorising, just because the work of correction is made easy for the teacher, is to make learning dull and frustrating.

And to make students competent in two languages -- Chinese and English, regardless of whichever language stream they go to, is a demanding task. But we must achieve this. Then there must be the right balance between academic work and extra-mural activities. Physical fitness and development of the character are as important as imparting knowledge and skills.

You should discuss these problems in Chinese schools. You should exchange experience and ideas with teachers in the other language streams. We must give our young a rounded education, so that their ability, skills and stamina can create a thriving Singapore.

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