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Recognising and rewarding teachers' contributions

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While there is universal recognition of the role of education in securing economic development and facilitating the intellectual and civic growth of the individual, comparatively little academic research is being conducted to investigate and recognise teachers' contributions to national economies, social cohesion and world peace. The vast fields of educational studies and classroom pedagogy have for the last few decades focused mainly on issues of teacher preparation, educational achievement, classroom methodologies, curriculum development and innovation, standardised assessment and teacher effectiveness. The role of the competent and effective teacher in the educational experience of any nation is well recognised and different proportions of national income are dedicated to the educational sector of any country. However, teachers do not often receive the recognition they deserve for their stalwart contribution to the making of literate societies (Olson and Torrance, 2001) or for their immeasurable efforts to educate generations of learners and inspire them to better futures. This situation is true of the world of English language teaching (ELT) in its various formats such as teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) or the ever spreading teaching English as a second language (TESL). This paper is an attempt to redress this lack of recognition and to highlight the major roles that teachers play in any economic and social system.

Teacher evaluation and market-driven education

In this paper I argue that teacher evaluation models and practices have so far failed to recognise the various kinds of impact teachers can have on their learners in the first place and on society as a whole. Educational institutions around the world are under increasing pressure to adopt reliable and cost effective measures and instruments to assess and evaluate teachers' knowledge and competence in the classroom. In ELT in countries such as Egypt (McCloskey, Thornton & Toubia, 2007) and Japan (Burden & Troudi, 2007) the norm in teacher evaluation is the use of surveys and direct observation to ensure sustainability and maintainability of standards. While qualitative research methods are also used, the main focus in teacher evaluation remains on observable behaviour and measurable educational output, despite the fact that teachers' work is multi-varied and too immense to be reduced to a list of items on an observation sheet. A major assumption in many a teacher evaluation exercise is that the tools being used are reliable and valid; a second assumption is that good training can result in good teaching. However, teaching is not just the result of one's educational training and preparation and neither is it the application of a number of instructional strategies to cover a lesson plan on a particular day. Even when observations are unstructured and open-ended they

can only reflect a tiny proportion of a teacher's preparation and effort. Likewise, reliable survey items distributed to students or supervisors at the end of term can only represent a fraction of what teaching involves. In their zeal for viability and effectiveness and with a managerial approach to teaching and learning, a number of teacher evaluators have ignored the human side of teaching. Teaching is about passion, love of education and learning, inspiration, compassion, consideration of the other, dedication to trusting students, belief in the power of knowledge, and an incessant attempt to make a difference to the lives of learners. Teaching is also about not giving up on demotivated and disinterested learners and about staying in the classroom despite adverse working conditions and the low status of the profession. Teacher reevaluation does not account for teachers' continuous efforts to help their students or the amount of work done behind the scenes. Teachers work at home in the evenings and at weekends in the constant quest to find alternative and appropriate approaches to make a lesson interesting or a difficult concept accessible. To a dedicated teacher, any educational and non-educational resource such as media, film or art can be turned into a learning opportunity.

Celebration not measurement

In my invited talk at the TESOL Arabia International conference (2008) I posed the question whether the enthusiastic teacher was becoming an endangered species. Even though enthusiasm and passion in teaching are often considered among the main reasons young people join the teaching profession, these two attributes cannot be taken lightly or assumed to be permanent features of teaching. Despite their love of teaching, teachers can be affected by their work conditions, managerial decisions, lack of support, a volatile social status and mainly a change in the nature of education in most parts of the world. Bemoaning a change in the teaching culture in higher education which has affected teachers' enthusiasm, Palaima, a professor of Classics, (2008. p.31) states that "genuine passion is not only largely missing in higher education nowadays, it is discouraged by institutional and government policies and practices". He warns against educational systems and institutions that are solely guided by efficiency models and by a focus on career development at the expense of nurturing a sense of obligation to society, intellectual curiosity and most importantly capacity for true human sympathy. It is of course not known how widespread this picture drawn by Palaima is, but there are signs that educational institutions are increasingly upfront about their economically driven goals. With changes in educational focus, it is expected that passion, enthusiasm and inspiration to encourage an active mind and a socially conscious spirit among students will take a back seat. Teachers are also well aware of economic and social forces shaping national educational strategies and are accordingly urged to adopt viable and effective pedagogies to help students achieve their career goals.

A brief review of discourses used in many educational institutions in different countries such as the USA, the UK, and the UAE will reveal how managerial and economic approaches have become solidly entrenched in the different levels of the curriculum (Slattery, 2006). From goals and objectives to classroom practices and evaluation strategies, teachers are reminded that the focus has to be on helping students learn new skills required by future employers. Employability has therefore become a target and a criterion of evaluation for

educational institutions. This has become the norm in both the private and public sectors. Students have become 'clients' or consumers in consumer-driven schools, which have become economic engines in consumer-driven societies. Customer satisfaction, a well-established marketing principle, has therefore become a target of education. This is not an argument against students' satisfaction and their right to have a voice in their own learning, but when they are treated as customers the result is that students will treat education as an entitlement rather than a privilege. This in itself will produce citizens with a focus on self-gratification, individualism and unhealthy competitiveness and no sense of obligation or debt to society. Therefore, teachers have to play a role in redressing this imbalanced approach to education and to do so their passion, enthusiasm, sense of social justice and intellectualism must not be curbed by managerial leadership and mercantile aspirations.

The ELT picture

Because English is globally considered as key to the success of any model of economic development and prosperity, ELT practitioners find themselves in the middle of the debate on the nature and purpose of education (Pennycook, 2001, 2007; Jenkins, 2007; Holliday, 2005). Although ESL and EFL teachers play a major role in such a market-driven education their contribution is rarely publicly recognised. In fact, in different parts of the world, and especially in contexts where English is in a transitional process of becoming a medium of instruction such as in the Gulf countries, many teachers suffer from casualisation of the workforce (Senior, 2006). This is because English language programmes in most universities are still considered as service programmes preparing students for the "real" academic departments. Teachers are therefore hired as per demand and according to student numbers with a mission to equip students with a set of well-determined language skills. Contracts vary in length but they are rarely permanent and teachers can be dispensed of simply on economic grounds, especially in private institutions. The situation is better in the public sector but the question about the status of ELT remains unresolved.

With the fast growing economies of the Gulf countries thousands of TEFL teachers are hired to meet the demands of the ever-increasing number of private and public educational institutions in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. While most university TEFL teachers enjoy attractive financial remuneration and housing facilities this cannot be said of their colleagues in the primary and secondary sectors. But in spite of difficult conditions at work these teachers continue to contribute to the education of future generations and to the overall economy of the region. While they may be economically vulnerable, I argue that they are in position of strength because of the quality of their work and valuable contribution.

Dedication in the face of adversity

TEFL teachers continue to be dedicated to their educational goals and to their students. They spend a massive amount of time preparing lessons, revising their students' work, checking and monitoring their progress and advising and counselling them. They also take their work home and are constantly concerned about the learning experience of their students and their overall educational attainment. They are proud of the progress of their learners and the difference they are making to their lives. The relationship they have with these students is

based on genuine care and concern. This kind of dedication cannot be systematically observed unless longitudinal and ethnographic research studies are conducted; TEFL supervisors need to be aware that teachers' work is far reaching and extends beyond the limit of a one shot observation. Because of their dedication teachers deserve unconditional respect and gratitude from their students, administrators and society as a whole. Some schemes are in place to recognise teachers' work but they are mostly short sighted and based on competition. Best teacher awards, organised annually in many countries, might be well meaning but are at best limited in scope and at worst divisive. What is needed is recognition of teachers' dedication outside the realm of teacher evaluation. To do this, social attitudes to teachers need to be re-examined and changed. When teaching regains its image as a respectable occupation and schools and universities are seen again as genuine places for learning rather than agents of competition for economic prosperity, teachers will be in a better social position.

It has sadly become common for teachers and parents to indulge in nostalgic reminiscence of the 'old days' when the teacher was respected in the classroom and outside it. It is also a fact of modern societies that teachers are sometimes subjected to disrespect and even verbal and physical abuse by their own students. While these cases are still relatively rare they do reflect how attitudes have changed in society. It is therefore an urgent priority that governments, ministries of education, philosophers of education and teacher educators intervene to redress this phenomenon.

Patience and professionalism

Despite their hard employment conditions, mounting administrative and bureaucratic pressure and the various challenges of their daily routines, teachers keep coming to their classrooms. This patience and resilience should not be explained by and reduced to mere economic factors. Teachers like any other members of society have to earn a living and secure a source of income in increasingly difficult financial times yet many continue to choose the teaching profession despite its relatively limited material rewards. This is because they are allured by the mission of education and a desire to make a difference in society. Teacher dissatisfaction and frustration is common even in rich educational institutions with excellent facilities when teachers feel they are not performing to their potential because of policies and regulations. However, even with this frustration and lack of reward the numbers of those who leave the profession is much lower than those who remain. What teachers value is recognition of their experience and professionalism. Most are interested in seeking professional development and are aware of the role of updating their knowledge to meet the requirements of new educational developments in modern society. They need to be supported in their efforts for professional growth, but this is lacking for the majority of primary and secondary teachers. For example, in the United Arab Emirates, most school teachers do not have access to a systematic professional development scheme which will fund attendance of conferences or short educational courses. However, despite lack of resources or official encouragement many teachers take individual initiatives to seek ongoing professional development opportunities. Many belong to professional teacher organisations and subscribe to academic journals.

Fortunately with the advent of the internet teachers have free access to a wide range of academic papers and practical resources for everyday classroom use. Teachers' dedication and enthusiasm in the face of adversity should not distract us from a grim reality in a number of contexts. Senior states that the ELT profession is becoming vicarious as:

Significant numbers of ELT teachers are leaving the profession, their positions filled by people less well-qualified and experienced than themselves. A key reason for seeking alternative career paths is that language teaching offers few pathways for promotion and makes it difficult for teachers without permanent positions to secure mortgages or be confident that they can support their families in the long run" (2006, p.240).

For the expatriate school and even university teacher in the Gulf this situation described by Senior is a constant source of worry. In fact, job security and the spectre of job loss and uncertainty about one's future are a looming threat that is perpetually affecting teachers' morale, peace of mind and self esteem. While the intention here is not to draw a picture of doom and gloom the reality remains that no expatriate teacher, regardless of his/her professional competence and experience, is immune to such a threat. Teachers recognise that this is a feature of the economic and socio-political realities of their host countries and have to develop coping and surviving strategies if they wish to maintain their positions. Alwan (2006) states that EFL teachers in the UAE had very little say in issues of "job security and issues of hierarchy and control" (p.5). There are of course success stories of satisfied teachers who were able to bypass the bureaucracy and lack of status and support to develop their own careers and grow professionally. This is mostly in the tertiary sectors where employment conditions are better and the professional support systems are more established.

Choice not coercion

Teachers are lifelong learners by nature and are well aware of the importance of continuous professional development (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001). What they need is a supportive environment that recognises their learning needs. Teachers are increasingly interested in research both as users and producers in order to increase their effectiveness in the classroom and to understand how language learning takes place. To do research, they need guidance and training in a conducive and non-threatening manner. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect on the reductionist and technicist methods that stifle creative learning and imagination in top-down systems of education (Kincheloe, 2003). If research is to become a natural part of teaching it needs to come from the teacher's own initiative (Burnaford, Fisher & 2001). It is through personal choice that a research culture can flourish and not through imposition and coercion. In a study I conducted on the status of action research in the UAE (Troudi, 2008b) I argue that imposing action research on teachers and using it as an evaluation tool is bound to have a counter effect on teachers. In the words of one of the research participants "school teachers in the UAE are now required to carry out action research as part of their job. I don't think you can force people and expect them to do them properly" (p. 441). If teachers are given choices and asked for their views on various educational issues they will cooperate while marginalisation will only alienate them further.

Conclusion

In addition to raising awareness about the plight and conditions of EFL teachers through conference presentations, academic papers and professional development programmes, research is needed to understand the extent of teachers' effect on their students and on educational systems on the whole. Very little is known about how EFL teachers perceive themselves as classroom teachers at different stages of their career and what they think about their profession. Qualitative research in its various formats such as biographical and ethnographic studies has the potential of exploring in depth teachers' views on their own professional lives and how they cope with the demands of the classroom, educational systems, institutional bureaucracies and the vicariousness of their employment.

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