

Exploring the Challenges for Teacher Educators

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Teacher competence is recognised as an important requisite to improve students' academic performance and their experiences of schooling. Although proponents of standard-based competency have welcomed its introduction, this article argues that standard-based competency poses significant challenges for teacher educators as they set out to train new teachers to begin teaching in ways that are congruent to the standards. The Malaysian government hopes that by initiating standards by which teachers are to be appraised upon, will in turn effect changes in how they are prepared. However, less understood are the challenges it presents for the teaching institutions. This article presents various challenges (and possibilities) for teacher educators. Although the article lacks empirical base for examining these issues, it offers instead a logical analysis based on the authors' own (and others') experiences to illuminate the issues.

Keywords Competency, teaching standards, teacher education.

Introduction

The Standard Guru Malaysia or the Malaysian Teacher Standards (MTS) was formulated in 2008 and was formally launched in December 2009 by the Minister of Education Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Malaysia has now become the first nation in Southeast Asia to adopt a competency-based teacher standard ("Malaysia First in Region to Adopt Benchmark", 2009).

Dialogues and debates about standards fill the air. Websites of most government school portals publish several links to the MTS to encourage teachers to adopt the MTS, align their practices to the vision of the MTS and gauge for themselves their own teaching effectiveness. Teachers in Malaysia must now concern themselves with the MTS.

Teachers are to use the standards as part of their own self-appraisal and to benchmark their teaching competency against the MTS. They must attempt to teach in the direction of the new standards and to meet the performance standards eschewed

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within the guidelines in the MTS. Along the way they must also be able to reason and reflect upon complex problems of practice and improve their teaching.

According to Mohamad Sabri Mohd Arsad, the President of the Malay Teachers' Union, the MTS has been touted as a model indicator for professional development and a system to ensure that the teaching profession gets the professional standing it deserves (Othman, 2007). Joint Teachers Union Committee Chairman Jemale Paiman adds that the MTS is a set of high and rigorous standards that teachers must demonstrate to achieve and it is not about ranking teachers (Idris, 2009). Lok Yim Pheng, the Secretary General of the National Union of the Teaching Profession concurs that it is a vision of quality in teaching that will guide teachers to be more innovative and to improve their teaching knowledge and skills (Idris, 2009). Proponents of the MTS also suggests that with the use of rigorous teaching standards will build an image of accomplished teaching thus instilling confidence and positiveness into the general perception of the public towards government schools (Asri, 2009). Other possibilities also include dispelling the negative perception that the teaching profession is a 'career of last resort' and attract qualified candidates into the profession (Idris, 2009); and promote teachers who are more reflective practioners (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009).

Along with the positive endorsements 'pro-MTS' have given to the standards, educators have also levied challenges to the MTS. Questions have been raised as to whether there is alignment of the competencies that teachers possess to the visions of an accomplished practioner put forth in the MTS (Goh et al., 2011). Others may question whether the MTS is able to distinguish between accomplished and mediocre teachers (King, 1994; Serafini, 2002). Some educators may see the application of standards to teaching as restrictive whilst others may question whether the standards can adequately capture a complex event such as teaching (Serafini, 2002). The use of standards is to reflect a vision of accomplished teaching that is hoped teachers will be able to demonstrate in the years to come. However, critics still challenge that the standardisation of teaching impedes the creativity, autonomy and flexibility of teachers to respond to individual student needs.

Any efforts to change and improve teaching will always present significant challenges for the professional development of all teachers. To investigate the full spectrum of challenges of the MTS for the professional development of all teachers is beyond the scope of this modest article. However, pre-service teacher education does seem a reasonable place to begin the discussion, as it is here that new teachers begin to learn to teach in ways that are aligned with the MTS. This article specifically focuses on the challenges of teacher educators as they grapple with the best ways to align the standards to how they train and prepare pre-service teachers. Because the MTS is still new in Malaysia, the standards-based effort has not undergone much research and scrutiny, therefore, very little (if any) empirical data exist to indicate how effective it has been to improve teaching or how it has affected individual teachers or on teacher education. Instead, what this article offers is a logical discussion to examine some challenges to teacher education based on the authors' own (and others') practices and experiences in teaching and teacher education.

The MTS

The original 2009 published edition of the Malaysian Teacher Standards establishes the "professional competencies that should be achieved by the teachers and what needs to be provided by training institutes to help teachers achieve the prescribed levels of

competency” (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009, p. 3). The MTS comprises three content standards which are:

- Standard 1: Professional values within the teaching profession. This standard refers to those values teachers hold and that should be developed so that teachers can more effectively contribute to the teaching profession to achieve the aims of the national education system.

Teachers must be seen to uphold the cultural values of the country and possess a strong sense of patriotism. Teachers must also ground their teaching in the belief that all students have the capacity to learn and should therefore be treated fairly, with integrity and compassion (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009).

- Standard 2: Knowledge and understanding of education, subject matter, curriculum and co-curriculum. Teachers should have sound knowledge to improve professionalism in teaching, carry out their duties efficiently and effectively and be more creative and innovative.
- Standard 3: Skills of teaching and learning. This standard focuses on the ability of teachers to plan, implement and evaluate teaching and learning, and extra-curricular activities.

Standards 2 and 3 will require teachers to assist their students to meet the standards for learning outcomes; be innovative in their teaching; and assess students at a much higher level of thinking such as problem solving, decision-making and being able to continually learn, think, do and create (Zakaria, 2000; Abd Rashid, 2002). Teachers must also understand that different learning diversities can exist within their classrooms; they must show that they are able to demonstrate, select and design good instructional tasks. Moreover, they are also required to teach more complex content at a deeper level of understanding and integrate teaching and learning with technology, whilst covering the national curriculum. Teachers must act more as a facilitator by initiating classroom discussions, attending to students’ understanding, using new ways of assessing, effectively managing the classroom and student behavior, and at the same time, ensuring that all their students achieve meaningful and effective learning.

Each content standard is divided into three to eight competencies. The competencies address the unique teaching characteristics of each content standard that reflect the vision of accomplished teaching. For example, in Standard 3, the competencies are: (a) planning for teaching and learning, (b) implementing teaching and learning, (c) evaluating and assessing, and (d) managing the classroom (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009, p. 25). The standards are not subject specific.

Reasons for the MTS

The MTS has been created to serve two distinct purposes, one being to serve as an early ‘warning system’ so that teachers themselves are aware of the need to undertake further strengthening, improvement and enhancement of their knowledge, skills and personality. According to Asariah Mior Shaharuddin, the Education Deputy Director General, the MTS: “serve as guidelines for teachers to develop professional values, knowledge and

understanding while acquiring the relevant skills in teaching” (Chapman, 2009, para 2), and “this is something we have worked very hard for and is in line with the issue of teacher professionalism brought up during the teachers’ forum” (Chapman, 2009, para 7). The second purpose is to increase the professional development of the teaching profession and the overall quality of education in Malaysia (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009). The MTS is seen as an effort to elevate teaching excellence in Malaysia and is an attempt to remove misconceptions of what encompasses competent teaching and to uplift a rather eroded image of the profession (Othman, 2007).

If standards are to be applied in the quest to improve teachers’ teaching competency, then teacher educators need to lead the way. If teaching is going to be defined in these ambitious manner, then teacher educators need to be able to lead in defining, measuring and improving teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Teaching institutions play a significant role in assisting pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers begin learning to teach that are congruent with the standards effort to improve teacher quality. It would be safe to claim that the new standards also represent the standards towards which Malaysian teaching institutions must now aspire. What is less sure, however, are the challenges that lay ahead as teacher educators grapple with the best ways to align the standards to how they train and prepare pre-service teachers and to get pre-service teachers ready to face the new standards era.

Challenges for teacher educators

Perhaps the easiest way to respond to any new initiative is by tweaking the current teaching curriculum by adding a course or two, changing some components, inserting some new experiences and installing it as a new re-packaged curriculum. However, if the education effort to improve teacher competence is to succeed, perhaps teacher educators need to re-formulate and re-shape the curriculum’s structure and content at the core. This change does raise three challenges for teacher educators. The first is the issue is the widening gap between what student teachers bring to their training with what they must be prepared for. The second centres on preparing student teachers for an uncertain practice, while the third challenge is the rhetoric-reality gap of the MTS.

Traditional and predictable images of teaching and learning

Student teachers who enter teaching institutions often feel that they know what it is to be a teacher, they are confident to teach, lead discussions and to assess well. They have seen it all a hundred times in their own lives as students in schools. When they enter the teaching institutions, they become impatient when their educators now ask them to think differently and to reconsider how teachers should behave in the new standards based era. Therefore, teacher educators are faced with an issue, how best to prepare their student teachers for situations that are different from what their students have experienced. Student teachers are asked to re-consider what they know, and this can make teacher education difficult work (Feiman-Nemser & Featherstone, 1992).

Student teachers must now learn to become facilitators, they now allow their own students to find the solution and to learn to guide rather than dictate, instead of merely ‘completing the syllabus’, they are required to ensure that a problem is worked through in greater depth. Teachers are also required to pose a problem that is likely to necessitate higher order thinking skills and unconventional responses. Teachers are to move away from structuring students’ work to help them avoid mistakes or merely

providing answers to problems. Teachers would also be required to treat their students differently, instead of forming ability groups, teachers must expect high levels of performance from all their students regardless of ability.

As the MTS is formed based on the goals of access and equity (Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009), teachers are challenged to serve the needs of their students whose cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds which are different from their own. A challenge then to teacher educators is to breakdown student teachers' developed values, norms and habits of learning along diverse cultural and ethnic lines. Student teachers must learn to teach for diversity. When student teachers are in conflict with their own beliefs, expectations and understandings about learning, they may teach in ways that will fail to serve their diverse students (Banks et al., 2005), possibly then compromising the competency that promotes good teaching as espoused in the standards. This puts onus on teacher educators to adopt the new policies themselves if institutions are to produce competent future teachers. Preservice training needs to change with the approaches advocated by the standards. Student teachers must break free from their traditional and predictable images of teaching and learning. Teacher educators may need to provide opportunities and avenue for teacher candidates to analyse and reflect upon those in-grained perceptions and beliefs so that these beliefs can be discussed and dispelled. Through student teachers' own self-evaluation of their beliefs, what may develop are new images of good teaching and the formation of fresh beliefs about good teaching to propel and sustain them through their teaching careers.

Training for uncertain practice

In the current Malaysian norm of 'spoon-feeding' type of teaching that embraces a drill and practice approach for examination (Raja Musa & Nik Yusoff, 2000; "UPSR and PMR may be abolished", 2010), the MTS will require beginning teachers to move away from the 'conventional' mode of teaching and learning, which is defined as emphasising teaching as telling and learning as listening (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The other spectrum of 'conventional' mode are learner-centred teaching which emphasises conceptual understanding and provide opportunities to all students to think critically, solve problems and make meanings of their learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The Malaysian government has made plans to abolish the Primary Six and the Secondary Year Three National Examinations in an effort to move the school system away from an 'examination-centric' structure ("UPSR and PMR may be abolished", 2010). The challenge then is the training of new teachers that will require them to move away from the popular drill and practice mode and away from an 'examination-centric' form.

In a 'conventional' mode, the teacher plans a lesson to provide information. However, in the teaching promoted by the MTS, planning a lesson may change, for example, to one that engages students in open-ended problems, accepting different answers, allowing students to struggle with confusion, and at the same time managing a productive discussion. In the first scenario, a teacher plans by analysing the subject material, devices steps to provide clear explanations, considers a strategy or uses teaching aids that can better clarify the information, and decides on the best assignment. In the standards era scenario, a teacher must now explore a problem within a subject more carefully, expands what is stated in the written text and links it to students' 'real-life' situations. The teacher tries to put herself/himself in the shoes of the students and imagine how the students may explore the problem, how the students may think and solve the problem. Assessments take the forms of students presenting the work and

justifying their best solutions. A teacher may find it hard to plan a series of steps, as the lesson will be dependent on what her/his students do and say. A teacher is not long in a 'clearly mapped out journey' but rather on 'teaching voyage'. During this 'voyage', a teacher must be confident with the terrain she/he is in - a teacher must be alert to what the students are saying, at the same time - allowing constructive responses and drawing out ideas from the other students. If an example of lesson planning may need to change, may it also mean that teacher educators' understanding of how student teachers learn to plan need to change, and that other aspects of learning to teach need to change too? What can teacher educators do?

Teacher educators have important roles to play in increasing student teachers' insights, teaching skills, and assisting them to seek and make sense of pedagogical information in the context of teaching and learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Teacher educators are required to introduce new ideas to challenge popular assumptions, processes, and outcomes in teacher education. Clearly too, in preparing student teachers for the standards-based era, teacher educators need to also practice new curricular materials in their programs, be they case studies, using CD-ROMS, creating actual teaching environment, or immersing their students into actual school environments. Sometimes in the excitement of new designs and ideas, teacher educators tend to forget that they have at their disposal a method that is inexpensive, yet effective - they can 'walk the talk', that is, to teach student teachers as they would have them teach. Teacher educators use their own teaching to help their students learn to teach. Student teachers develop teaching skills by observing how their educators facilitate and teach and at the same time analyse what impact those instructions have on them. If carried out as part of the teacher educators' teaching process, the teaching activities may help foster a common understanding of what 'new' teaching should be and to strengthen shared standards. Teacher educators need to consider constructing an environment in which student teachers are able to apply new representations of practice and provide them with opportunities to investigate approaches to teaching and learning that are compatible with the idea of a standards-based agenda. One way in which this may be achieved is to situate work in the schools by developing resources and opportunities for teacher candidates to examine new images of practice in schools. No matter how good a teacher education program is constructed or no matter how high the quality of the teaching curriculum, student teachers will still not experience the new images of teaching if they do not have the opportunity to try it out in a real environment. Critics may argue that the mandatory teaching practicum that student teachers are required to undergo is already in practice. However, this time around, teacher educators must seek out schools and teachers who teach and think in ways that support the efforts in the new standards framework. Since most schools are probably also struggling to understand the requirements of the MTS, the visions of teaching and learning towards the MTS do not, at least for now, exist in many schools. There will not be many teachers who are ready to help new teachers with the kind of practice and ways of working which is in line with the standards.

Probably, teaching institutions should consider establishing some kind of developmental school, rather like the Laboratory Schools situated in the University of Chicago in America. The early laboratory schools housed in the University of Chicago were envisioned by John Dewey to challenge traditional and conservative attitudes about education. The schools were not only committed to delivering new and different experiences for students in the classrooms then, but were also as an avenue to assist in the preparation of prospective teachers. Today, these laboratory schools have become ambitious learning communities with both teachers and students engaged in shared

learning and inquiry (Harms & DePencier, 1996). If similar institutions can be developed in Malaysia, it can be a site for teacher education to develop resources and at the same time provide opportunities for student teachers to meet and examine new ways of practice. There will be sharing of teaching practices and student teachers will have the opportunity of listening to commentaries from experienced teachers about the difficulties and rewards of teaching in new ways (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Moreover, they can also work and try out the new roles that will be required of them as teachers. They can be assimilated to the new ways through their own capacity to form, experiment and interpret their own practices.

Rhetoric-reality gap of the MTS

The MTS attempts to establish underlying conceptions of competent teaching. The underlying conception of competent teaching emphasises the importance of perceived action and decision making on the part of the teacher. For example, in one of the question pertaining to managing class discipline, teachers are asked to choose from a scale numbered 1-4 if they are capable of: ‘implementing classroom rules based on the school’s rules’, ‘undertaking appropriate action on negative student behaviour’, ‘referring the case of a severe discipline to discipline teacher / counselor / teacher guidance’, and ‘discussing the case of a severe discipline with parents’ (Malaysian Teacher Standards, Standard 3. Question 24). As statements of good class management, there is little to dispute. However, what should a teacher, confronted with a disciplinary issue that has prevented the lesson from proceeding, *do*? And how should the teacher decide? There appears to be a large chasm between those competency statements about what a teacher is capable of doing as part of the teacher’s role and the actual enactment of it. In addition, teachers are afforded no opportunity to explain those actions or decision, and scoring did not allow for the reality that good class management could take many forms.

Probably the gap that exists between the rhetoric of the competency statements and the reality of classroom teaching lies in MTS’s newness. Ng (2008) has argued that sometimes, rhetorical statements are not necessary all that bad as they symbolise an ideal that is ambitious and hopefully inspirational. Rhetorical statements “can signal various desiderata or directions but may not rigidly determine which concrete actions to be embedded within” (Ng, 2008, p. 600). In the case of MTS, this rhetoric-reality gap will continue to exist, at least until there is more evidence collected about whether and if those competent teaching advocated by the standards work. Probably with time and experience, this novelty will diminish and there will be more evidence on which to compare and a clearer perspective will emerge to drive teaching development. Meanwhile can teacher educators afford to wait too long before propelling change in teacher education?

Concluding remark

Although challenges for teacher educators have been raised - and they are by no means comprehensive, teacher educators can decide to remain in the periphery and not make any significant effort or they can take this opportunity to change boldly and be guided with new ideas of what is possible. The current attraction with performance standards in Malaysia can work in favour for teaching institutions. It offers opportunities for teacher educators to break with the past and reformulate new methods, investigate new ways of doing things and explore new kinds of teaching. Teacher educators will need to work

through the standards and begin to reflect and critique their own practices from different perspectives, they must courageously make appropriate changes and decision for the training of their graduates. Teacher educators must also start to share the same goals, standards and knowledge base for the successful engagement in improving teacher learning and practice. Teacher educators play a significant role in assisting pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers begin learning to teach that are congruent with the standards effort to improve teacher competence. (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Probably, not every student teacher who begins teaching will be able to meet the high demands of the MTS, but teacher educators must ensure that they are given the right preparation to do so.

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