

Difficult Situations

Students today have to deal with a lot more than just their final exams. Whether it be problems at home, academic stress, or a creeping depression with the way they look, teachers have to grapple with the many reasons why a student may not be doing well in class. This *SingTeach* issue offers a glimpse into some of the problems that students face and the counsellors, teachers, and researchers who are helping them.



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Inspire

A Child a Day

SingTeach talks to Educational psychologist Geraldine Nguang and Learning Support Specialist Magdalen Loh about what it's like to help children struggling with learning issues.

Ten-year-old Ming (not his real name) has difficulty paying attention in class and likes to disturb his classmates and teachers. Seven-year-old Ben gets angry with himself when he cannot read or spell a word.

All students face different challenges in the classroom. However, kids like Ming and Ben need more than just a remedial class to help them with their work. Geraldine Nguang and Magdalen Loh are two former teachers whose jobs revolve around providing this extra support.

Geraldine, an educational psychologist, assesses each child's situation and tries to find a suitable intervention. Meanwhile, Magdalen runs the Specialised Learning Support Programme and a reading programme, which caters to primary school students with learning needs. Both work for the Students Care Service (SCS) where they help children with learning difficulties.

With more and more children being referred to the SCS every year, Geraldine and Magdalen have seen a wide range of learning difficulties, including dyslexia, autism, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder. But if there's one thing that experience has taught them, it's that things are never as simple as putting a name to a condition.

Kids in need

Many of the children helped by the SCS also come from difficult home environments. Usually referred to the centre by hospitals and schools, a majority are from lower income families and have difficulties with the English language.

As a result, learning issues are often compounded by other behavioural and

emotional problems. Magdalen believes that one way to deal with this is to first manage the emotional aspect, and not just address the learning disability or bad behaviour.

With every new student she meets, she makes sure that she observes them in class in order to understand where the real problem lies. This includes taking time to speak with the child and, more importantly, listen to their problems.

Ben, for example, could not read when he first came to SCS. When asked to spell the word "PLAY", he gave up after the first two letters. With his fists clenched and his body tense, he would scold Magdalen when she encouraged him to "just try".

As she took time to talk to him, Magdalen realised that Ben was afraid to try because every time he got something wrong, his parents would beat him. With her help, Ben has learnt that it is ok to get the answer wrong, but it is not ok to get so upset with himself and with others.

"Sometimes it has gone on for quite a while, and they do not know how to speak up," explains Magdalen. "You have to initiate it."

Parents in distress

Besides working with the children, Geraldine and Magdalen also try to help the parents in supporting their child. It is particularly challenging when the parent is part of the cause of the child's distress.

Ming, for example, has been with SCS for 6 years now. When he was first brought to the centre, Geraldine worked with Ming and his mother to create simple, manageable tasks for him to complete. As she explained to Ming's mother, "We have to start from where he actually can succeed first and then go on."

Ming's case has been difficult to diagnose because his behaviours keep changing and his mother is not keen on a formal diagnosis. "My goal is to help the parents cope because the problems will change, especially when they

become adolescents...to help the parent understand the child," says Geraldine.

"You just have to take time," adds Magdalen, who makes an effort to speak with the parents of the children she works with. "You can't change them. But by helping the parents to understand their kids, I think it's a much greater success than what we can do for the child."

A holistic approach

Geraldine and Magdalen strongly believe that a holistic approach is best, where the parents and school teachers are involved in helping the child.

In Ming's case, for example, Geraldine keeps in touch with both the mother and his school teachers. "Where possible, everyone is in the loop," she says. "This way, the child gets support in a few ways."

Even then, Geraldine and Magdalen recognise that what they do cannot resolve the problem completely. The journey to recovery is often a long-drawn one, with many hurdles along the way, but the little rewards keep them going.

"Any little improvement is really very fulfilling," says Magdalen. "Success doesn't need to be big. I feel a sense of satisfaction also when they come back years later and they still remember this place."

For Geraldine, it is when parents express gratitude "in their own way". "I always tell the parent, you are actually the important person," she says, "we are just here to help and also journey together."

Tips for teachers

It just takes that extra bit of concern to show a child that you care, and many of the problems in the classrooms become a little more manageable. Geraldine and Magdalen offer the following tips for helping children with learning issues in the classroom.

1. Take time to ask

"Kids are never naughty," says Magdalen. "They are naughty for a reason." So take the time to find out. Magdalen recommends talking to a kid a day. "You don't need to solve their problem. Just let them understand that teacher knows."

2. Build rapport

"The idea is to teach them, not teach the subject," says Geraldine. Once you have established a relationship and gained their understanding, meeting their academic needs becomes lots easier.

3. Include the children

"Get your little ones to help," advises Magdalen. Where possible, teachers can apply the strategies used for the special needs child for the whole class, so that the child doesn't feel left out.

4. Get connected

"Target the ringleader," says Geraldine. Especially at the secondary school level, observe the class to see who the "triggers" are, dominant persons who change the class dynamics. "Spend some time to connect with those few people, to make friends with that person first."

5. Look after yourself

"First, we have to look after ourselves," cautions Geraldine. A stressed-out teacher will not be able to offer much help.

> Students Care Service

<<http://www.students.org.sg/>> is a voluntary social work organisation that provides help to students and their families. Their services include family case work, counselling, group work, training for parents and teachers, as well as educational assistance.



Ideas

Do Kids need a Longer Recess?

Children in Singapore are getting chubbier! According to a recent Straits Times report, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan has warned that the rising obesity rate—from 2.8% in 1994 to 3.6% in 2007—could one day become a big problem in Singapore. NIE's Physical Education and Sports Science staff offer a potentially simple solution to this weighty problem—PLAY.

When Associate Professor Michael Chia and his collaborator Dr Patricia Wong started the pilot study for PRIDE for PLAY (Personal Responsibility in Daily Effort for Play for Participation in Lifelong Activity for Youths) in 2007, they were convinced that play is beneficial for all.

And the results from the pilot study, which involved Primary 1 and 2 pupils in two schools, reaffirmed their belief.

What is PRIDE for PLAY?

In 2006, a study revealed that children need a daily dose of at least 90 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous exercise to stay healthy well into their adult years (Anderson et al., cited in Chia, 2007).

But the compulsory 70-105 minutes of weekly physical education (PE) lessons in our schools falls short of this requirement.

It seems that most parents would also prefer to keep their children at home after school, rather than let them out to play, because they fear for their safety. Most children end up watching TV, doing their homework, or playing computer games.

So, where and when can children find opportunity to engage in 90 minutes of healthy activity on a daily basis?

This prompted A/P Chia, Head of NIE's Physical Education and Sports Science Academic Group, to come up with PRIDE for

PLAY—an innovative and creative approach to keeping fit and fabulous.

As part of this study, 20-45 minutes of curriculum time was set aside daily for play. This was done by shortening each period for academic studies by 2-5 minutes. These extra minutes were then pooled to prolong recess time or to provide additional time slots during the school day for active physical play, over and above formal PE periods.

The benefits of PLAY

Playing is "a natural disposition" of all children and is an essential part of their development, says A/P Chia. But he believes that play can offer much more.

A/P Chia says that "play is a precursor to sports", which is a more organised form of play. It follows that developing a play culture is a step towards achieving our national goal of creating a sports-loving culture (see Lin, 2008). Thus, it is important that young people have access to fun and safe play in the school context frequently, if not on a daily basis.

Daily play in a school setting helps with weight maintenance and provides opportunities for pupils to be themselves as they can express themselves through movement, physical activity, and sports.

It also provides a much-needed break from all the "important near-work" of reading, writing, and working at the computer. This would certainly help to keep the rates of myopia, another growing concern, under control.

"Play is just healthy and it can provide balance," quips A/P Chia. "We certainly could have more of that in and outside of school." This balance means that pupils can learn better!

At the school level, play can aid in building up interpersonal relationships. In one of the participating schools, the principal was concerned that their Primary 6 pupils were not developing better bonds with their teachers. When A/P Chia learnt about this, he immediately saw how PRIDE for PLAY could help to facilitate and develop these pupil-teacher bonds in a naturalised and fun setting.

The programme creates an environment where pupils and teachers can mingle informally and try to understand each other from a different perspective. PRIDE for PLAY also provides an excellent platform for pupil bonding among the different races, which was another concern of the school.

Using the example of table tennis, A/P Chia explains: "Through PLAY, the pupils suddenly see that this teacher also loves table tennis, and it spins off a conversation that has nothing to do with language or math. That is also a naturalised setting for peers who previously may not naturally mix together to suddenly discover commonality."

The joys of PLAY

At the end of the trial semester, feedback from parents was positive. The schools were pleased because the programme has helped to boost school morale without suffering a dip in their academic standards. And the students, of course, are certainly not complaining.

A/P Chia revealed that even though the study has ended, the programme is still ongoing at both schools. PRIDE for PLAY has given these schools a greater momentum towards the holistic development of their pupils.

Encouraged by the positive results from the pilot study, A/P Chia hopes to share the joys of play with more schools. He has been awarded funding by NIE to do just that. This will allow him to collect more concrete evidence for the positive results of play from a wider range of schools.

A/P Chia is optimistic that more schools will subscribe to the programme. He hopes that this will, in some way, help our youths to enjoy an active lifestyle. "The time is ripe, and the school ethos is more open to different types of practices."

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> This project was conducted by the Physical Education and Sports Science (PESS) Academic Group
<<http://www.pess.nie.edu.sg>> at the National Institute of Singapore. For more information on PRIDE for PLAY, please contact A/P Michael Chia, Head PESS, NIE at michael.chia@nie.edu.sg



Voices

This Discipline Officer is now a School Counsellor

When the Ministry of Education launched the Full-Time School Counsellor Scheme in 2005, many teachers decided to take a step from education to counselling. For Vincent Chia, this turned out to be a bigger step than he imagined.

Vincent Chia flips open his appointment book and checks his schedule for the day. It seems that his entire morning is free but he's no stranger to unexpected visits. Since his midcareer shift from teaching to full-time counselling in 2006, Vincent has had students referred to him for reasons ranging from disruptive behaviour to skipping school. And while this former teacher has 8 years of experience under his belt, responding to students and their problems as a school counsellor is definitely a whole different ballgame.

For Vincent, becoming a counsellor was simply the end result of a series of events. He entered teaching not because he was passionate about education but because it allowed him to work with young people. Unfortunately, this became increasingly harder as he developed his career as a teacher. "As a new teacher, your focus is mainly on classroom teaching so you have a lot of time to be with students," explains Vincent. "But as you become developed as a

teacher, you have more responsibilities. It's more about interacting with vendors and your colleagues than the students."

Eager to find the time to be with students, Vincent took on a position as HOD for Discipline—a job he held for 3 years. Then, the Ministry of Education implemented the Full-Time School Counsellor Scheme <<http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-emotional-learning/social-emotional-learning-programmes/counselling/>> and he decided it was worth a try, "I thought it would be a good change from my usual role of discipline. It's the other end of nurturing a student."

Making adjustments

What most of us don't realise is that counselling is not about giving "expert advice" but talking to them in a way that will help them understand and solve their problems. "The nature of counselling is not directive," explains Vincent. "There's a balance we have to strike, whether to direct the students or have them take the lead in coming out with their own solutions."

Now in his third year in Henderson Secondary School, Vincent still remembers the difficult period of adjustment during his first few months as a full-time counsellor, when he had to catch himself from falling back into his role as HOD for Discipline. "I struggled quite a bit. At times, I would see students not behaving well and I don't know if I should point it out."

Vincent is also unsure of whether he can really put counselling theory like Carl Rogers' client-centred approach into practice. "When kids come to me and they step out of line, I correct them," he admits. "They cannot scream and hurl vulgarities then expect me to accept them as it is. For the time being, it's not something I can do yet."

And yes, Vincent does miss some aspects of being discipline officer—whether it be the clear-cut boundaries, defined scope, or its black and white nature. A lot of students face

issues which are rooted in relationship problems with parents, peers, and family. This means that Vincent has to engage not only the students but the people around them as well. "You seldom have parents who refuse to have their kids go for counselling. But when it comes to the parents themselves going for counselling, very few are willing," he says.

The bottom line

As a former teacher, Vincent is well aware of the difficulty of managing a room of 40 students. However, he makes sure to remind teachers of his own limitations as a counsellor—mainly, that they cannot expect one counselling session to change a student's attitude. "Sometimes it takes me many sessions just to get the student to talk. Not even to talk about the issues, just to talk!" he laughs.

As a result, Vincent is nonchalant about counting his "success stories". And in a way, perhaps this attitude is exactly what helps him do his job: having a real understanding of the problems his students face and the belief that his role as a counsellor is not to provide a solution for everything.

So what keeps counsellors going on with their jobs? For Vincent, it's his Christian faith and perhaps, the simple objective of showing students that the school can be a safe place for them too. "As long as the child knows that he can come to school and find some care and concern, we might be able to help them get through these years," he says. "No matter what problems they have, we just have to make sure that they will still be willing to come to school."

Tip for teachers

With all the things teachers have to do, Vincent knows it's hard to squeeze in extra time for teachers to really get to know all their students. He suggests a strategy that can help build rapport without sacrificing too much time:

Try to devote 15 minutes of your day getting to know **one** student. This might not seem like a lot but if more teachers get into it, the numbers will add up. "If all teachers do that, we are assured that at least 80 students are being given that individual attention everyday. If not, time will just pass like that."



Share

Film Review: Born Into Brothels

"I'm not a social worker. I'm not a teacher. And that's my fear, that I can't help them."

Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids (2004) is an Oscar award-winning documentary that brings us a heartfelt look at life in the brothels of Calcutta. However, this story is told not from the perspective of the women but from that of eight children armed with eight instamatic cameras.

The story begins with Zana Briski, a New York-based photographer who entered the brothels hoping to photograph the lives of the prostitutes working there. In the process of doing so, she discovers that the brothels are not only inhabited by women but by their families as well. This includes dozens of children who play in the narrow alleyways even as customers come to engage their mothers' services for the night.

Seeing how fascinated the kids were with her camera, Zana decides to start weekly photography workshops for eight children. Immediately, this becomes a means of expressing their frustrations, fears, and dreams of life beyond the brothels. And Zana begins to find herself moving from teaching principles of composition to finding ways to get these children into boarding schools outside the brothels.

The kids are well aware of where they stand in Indian society and for the girls, it is only a matter of time before they will be expected to

follow in their mothers' footsteps. As Koji, one of the kids in the film says, "The women ask me, 'When are you going to join the line?' They say it won't be long."

At first glance, *Born Into Brothels* seems like a film that was made to make you feel guilty. The knowledge that the cost of your movie ticket is enough to sustain a whole family does make one uncomfortable.

Yet, what makes *Born Into Brothels* special is that in spite of its bleak subject matter, the film maintains a pervasive sense of hope.

This documentary is also a wonderful learning resource that can teach students about human rights and the lives of children in difficult situations. Since the film, Zana has established a non-profit organisation that works towards helping other children empower themselves through art and photography. The film's website <<http://kids-with-cameras.org/education/>> provides teaching materials to help your students understand the children's story.

More importantly, it is essentially a movie for teachers—especially those who have doubted their ability to make an impact on their students. Zana's challenges and triumphs reminds us of the power of inspiring kids to go beyond their situations. As teachers, this is an opportunity we have every day. This film is a great way to jolt ourselves from the daily grind of covering the syllabus.



Understanding what it means to be a "Gone Case"

Maria Mahat reviews Gone Case, a Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award winner, which she discovers to be more than just a "heartlander" story.

Images of boys in school uniforms scouring HDB void decks and rooftops after school came to mind as I read *Gone Case*. This book tells the story of Yong and Liang, two boys

living in a housing estate in Singapore during the 1990s.

Although Yong is the protagonist of this "heartlander" story, the title is a more apt description for his best friend, Liang. If you would like an insight into the lives of your students who have similar profiles as Yong or Liang, perhaps this is a book you should read.

The emotions of Yong and his younger brother, Ti, are rather subtle. I find it is amazing that a 12- and an 8-year-old could remain stoic despite the strain in their family life.

When Yong's father decided to move back to his parents' so that the family could collect rent on the spare room to pay his debts, there were no emotional outbursts from the children. They did not even ask their parents why things were happening the way they did. Even though Yong acted "big" by bullying his brother and tried shaving to emulate his absent father, the two brothers remained responsible and wise.

Yong was doing well in his early primary school years but when he moved up a level, his results slipped. He was not a bad student but adults like his well-intentioned mother could only see his "slip" and not the probable cause of it. And this subtlety is what this book is all about.

Dave Chau's writing is subtle and the characters in *Gone Case* do not scream for attention but remind us to try and understand our children or students more. Sometimes, their passivity is just a cover-up for the internal battles that they have to confront in school, at home, or in life. While Yong was resilient enough to handle all these, not all our school kids these days are as hardy and level-headed.

A sad victim to circumstances would be Liang. There was no mention of Liang's father and his mother was a person full of anxiety, especially when it came to Liang's elder sister, Zhen.

Zhen had an undesirable reputation in school; she smoked, dressed sexily and had a gangster for a boyfriend. She later tried to commit suicide and it was Liang who found her lying in the toilet.

With so many things happening in his life, Liang took comfort in spending time on the rooftop of his flat. He was close to becoming a "gone case" or someone who was falling through the cracks.

Thinking that he was looking out for Liang, Yong had the gates to the rooftop locked. And although this resulted in the death of their friendship, Yong might have prevented the death of a friend.

Gone Case, peppered with Singlish, is suitable for local and non-local students or teachers who would like a sneak peek into the lives of kids and come to better understand them.

So be a "heartlander", go get a "kopi" and start reading it. *Gone Case* is definitely an easy afternoon read.

Maria <<http://www.crpp.nie.edu.sg/user/view.php?id=193&course=1>> is a project manager with CRPP and an editorial administrator of *Pedagogies: An International Journal*. Her research interests include early childhood education and children and the media. Before CRPP, she led a busy life as a broadcaster.





"Teaching" in real life



"Teaching" in movies