

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS

CATHERINE CHEAH MING MING

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Dedicate to my parents, Mr. & Mrs. Peter Cheah and
my mother-in law, Mdm. Lim Wee Meng for their prayers, encouragement and sacrifice.

My loving husband, Ronald Hendriks and
my lovely children, Lianne, Jonathan and Julian who are my source of inspiration and
determination.

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CATHERINE CHEAH MING MING

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristic of an excellent lecturer as perceived by the first year students of Malay Woman Training Institute the similarities and differences in the responses based on education level. Knowing what characteristics are correlated with excellence in teaching is important because it provides both pre-service and in-service teachers with an opportunity to evaluate their own teaching, receive feedback from students, and improve teaching. Also, this knowledge aids teacher preparation programs in designing their courses and in recruiting the best candidates for teaching. This will help the Teacher Education Division in modifying the curriculum to enhancing specific skills that a teacher must possess. Two distinct samples were involved in this study: For the (5-point) Likert scale, data will be collected from a group of 56 post graduate students from local university and 205 O' level school leavers from Malay Women Teachers' Institute in Malacca. Data analysis using SPSS version 14 through comparing means frequency, percentage, t-test and One-Way ANOVA. The findings of this study indicate that *good leader* is an important characteristic that contributes to excellent teachers. More than 90% of the students agree that the teaching skills such as *motivation, learning environment, facilitating learning, instructional approach and enhancement of student learning with technology* should be present in an excellent teacher. The comparison of the two means shows that students agreed that personal traits are more important than teaching skills in making an excellent teacher. There is no significant difference in the perceptions of excellent teachers between postgraduates and undergraduates students. The findings indicate that what matters most is employing a variety of teaching styles, positive attitude, establish a closer rapport with student can provide a better and conducive environment for learning. Lecturers must be more open to criticism, suggestions and constructive comments in order to change and adjust their personal traits to be a better person.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Naturally, all administrators in schools or colleges want their teachers or lecturers to excel. According to common belief if teachers are excellent, students will be excellent too. Some students would take the trouble to travel to the other side of town to a particular school rather than attend the nearest available schools. Why do they prefer certain school over the rest?

Generally, the school administrators have great influence on moulding their staff into excellent teachers. They exert influence through their attitude, by providing opportunities for professional development and through their recognition of teachers' efforts towards good teaching. Administrators who are concern, caring and sensitive to the needs of teachers and welfare motivate them to work harder. Other ways of appreciation include approving leave during hard times and a sense of empathy. Teachers' efforts ought to be rewarded accordingly through appraisal in their salaries and promotions.

In the area of self development, administrators can provide in-house training for teachers to update their skills and knowledge in order to keep abreast with changes in the field of education as the result of globalisation. Administrators can also create opportunities for teachers to participate in professional discussion, attend workshops, seminars, and conferences to enhance their teaching skills. Providing adequate resources such as reading materials, research journals, access to internet, classrooms which are equipped with the latest technology aimed at aiding the process

of teaching and learning, are other such examples in which administrators can contribute towards staff professional development.

Finally, teachers who work hard should be recognised for their efforts through grants or scholarships to pursue their studies. They should be encouraged by their administrators to conduct research and present papers in seminars and conference, and acknowledged when they published their research findings in journals. Students are given a chance to formally acknowledge the quality of teaching. It would also be a good idea if their teachers' efforts are acknowledged as a basis in rewarding tenure ship to the teachers.

1.2 Background of Problem

Since the early 1900s, various groups of people, from bureaucrats to university researchers, have regularly attempted to identify characteristics of an excellent teacher. Generally, great emphasis is placed on the overall need for a quality education.

While policy makers, administrators, and government officials have always taken a keen interest in providing all students with qualified teachers, a large array of universities researchers have tended to focus on students' perceptions of the characteristics of excellent teachers (Artiles & Trent, 1990; Basow, 1995; Karle-Weis, Newman, Newman, & Sovchik, 1990). After all, qualified teachers do not necessarily make excellent teachers. As the ultimate consumers of education, students can have a dramatic impact upon universities' reputations as well as teachers' employment (e.g. tenure) and salary increases. Additionally, students help define the criteria of good teaching. Studies of students' perceptions of teachers have been done in scope of interest, discipline, age and grade level, nationality, and gender.

Upon examining pre-service teachers' perceptions of effective teachers, one might hypothesize that these students would focus on the importance of instructional strategies rather than personality traits because they have studied cognition and instruction issues related to teaching students. Despite this hypothesis, research results are equivocal, as some studies refute the assumption while others validate the assumption. Artiles and Trent (1990) found that the social qualities (entertaining, boring, flexible, inflexible, approachable, unapproachable, friendly, distant, caring, and uncaring) were the most important qualities an excellent teacher. Likewise, Witcher and Onwuegbuzie (1999) reported that pre-service teachers focused on the affective characteristics to define an excellent teacher. In Witcher and Onwuegbuzie's study, student-centeredness, operationally defined as love of students, sensitivity, support, kindness, caring, and compassionate, were the important characteristics of an excellent teacher. In contrast, Brown and Johnson (2001) examined how students' perceptions of what makes an excellent teacher changed after completing an undergraduate learning course, and found that responses shifted from affective issues to more cognitive issues. For instance, the frequency of the theme "caring" decreased from 76.5% before the learning class to 65.4% after taking the class.

Meanwhile, the presence of themes related to classroom management, pedagogical foundation, behaviour modification, and tailored instruction increased from pre to post learning course. Without taking intended majors into account, in Crawford and Bradshaw's study (as cited in Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971), college students declared that knowledge of subject matter, organization, enthusiasm, and friendliness were the most important characteristics of an effective teacher. Supporting this, Downie (as cited in Costin et al., 1971) found that, according to college students, knowledge of subject, interest in subject, well preparedness, and ability to motivate students were critical characteristics of excellent teachers. Examining characteristics of effective teachers from a different angle, Murray, Rushton, and Paunonen (1990) examined affective (personality) traits that contribute

to excellent teaching. Depending on education level, undergraduate or graduate, their personality traits attributed with great teaching varied. Undergraduates correlated sociability, changeableness, attention seeking, liberalism, and extraversion with effective teaching. Graduate students, however, accredited excellent teachers with traits such as ambitiousness, endurance, orderliness, and compulsiveness (Murray et al.,1990).

Few studies have examined student perceptions of excellent teachers in countries other than the United States. Fraenkel (1995) observed and conducted student interviews in Australia, Germany, Korea, New Zealand, Poland, and the United States. According to his study, regardless of the country in which instruction is given, effective teachers embody similar traits. Hence, questions can be asked whether or not students in teacher training college in Malaysia perceive the same traits as their counterparts?

Students' perceptions of great teachers have also been examined for gender biases. In 1977, Wright and Alley (as cited in Karle-Weiss et al., 1990) asked students to identify their ideal teacher and their responses included the following: female, fun, a good dresser, and physically built. Witcher and Onwuegbuzie (1999) found that female teachers placed more emphasis on affective characteristics while males focused on classroom management issues. Additionally, Basow (1995) showed that an interaction between teacher gender and student gender exists in student evaluations of college professors. Hence, questions arisen as whether or not local students will evaluate their teachers similarly to their counterparts?

Although numerous studies have examined the characteristics of excellent teachers, more research needs to be carried out to determine how students define great teachers, especially with the changing role that technology plays in the classroom. This is especially relevant in the context of Malaysia. Although most teachers have access to computers and to the Internet, the majority of teachers still resist using instructional technology (Medcalf-Davenport, 1998). Hannafin and

Savenye (1993) viewed resistance to technology not as a resistance to the technology itself, but rather a resistance to the teachers' adaptation of their role from a lecturer or an imparter of knowledge to a facilitator. It remains to be seen whether a correlation exists between teachers who are deemed excellent by students and their use of technology. Do excellent teachers in Malaysia use technology widely?

1.3 Problem Statement

Since the middle of 2005, a programme for teacher training had been started and a cohort of secondary school leavers has been absorbed into the system in Malaysia. They were the pioneer group of the one-and-a-half- years foundation course pre-service teachers in various subjects. These were followed by a four-year degree course which they will graduate with a teaching degree. All of the 27 Teacher Training Colleges in Malaysia will be upgraded to Institute of Teacher Training at the beginning of year 2008. The institutes will provide training for courses leading to degree level either through twinning programs with local or foreign universities. The institutes also offer degree programs in education in several subjects. Other than courses offered full time, part time courses are also offered during the semester break.

In the era of globalization and e-learning, teacher training institutes are facing challenges and increasing demand from the stakeholders such as schools administrators, parents, students and community as a whole. It is very obvious that there are a change of learning environment, school culture, expectations, and mode of study among others. Lecturers on the other hand, started to develop a sense of the university as a knowledge-constructing community. In such a community, knowledge can be defined from a constructivist perspective as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated and thus non-objective (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Not taking such an approach to knowledge and learning for granted,

the researchers found it necessary to pause for a moment to ask the questions: What do students expect from lecturers in MWTI? Do the lecturers live up to their students' expectations of a lecturer? What are the students' perceptions of an excellent teacher?

This study is to narrow the gap between the expectations of the students and the characteristics of the lecturers. If the expectations of the students of their lecturers are not met, they will feel frustrated, lack of motivation and discouraged. These will push them further away from their goals as they are not motivated to learn, and look up to their lecturers for guidance and advice. They expect their lecturers to impart knowledge to them as what teachers do; on the other hand the lecturers tend to facilitate classes, assigning them with topics to be presented in class. In this case the students felt that they can do without the presence of their lecturers who merely supervise them instead of teaching them. As a result they will lost their respect of their lecturers, became disillusioned and thus this will affect their performance and their grades. The students' grades are not only important to their future undertakings but also as an insight and foresight of how effective are they as teachers for the next three decades. Their experiences will influence their stand as teachers that will affect all their students by the tens of thousand within their employment period.

1.4 Objectives of This Study

The study conducted by Johnson (2002) facilitated the formulation of the objectives of this study as well as many of the practical questions.

The objectives of this study are twofold:

- (1) To identify the characteristic of an excellent lecturer as perceived by the first year students of Malay Woman Training Institute.

- (2) To examine the similarities and differences in the responses based on PPISMP and KPLI program.

1.5 Research Questions

In addition to the quantitative data, demographic data will be obtained in order to understand other possible factors playing into the responses. The following research questions and hypothesis were addressed:

RQ1: What are the personal traits of an excellent lecturer from MWTI students' perspectives?

RQ2: What are the teaching skills that should be present among excellent lecturers from the MWTI students' perspectives?

RQ3: What makes an excellent teacher - personal traits or teaching skills?

1.6 Research Hypothesis

1.6.1 Is there a significant difference between MWTI post secondary school and post university students' perceptions of excellent teachers?

1.7 Significance of the Study

Knowing what characteristics are correlated with excellence in teaching is important because it provides both pre-service and in-service teachers with an opportunity to evaluate their own teaching, receive feedback from students, and improve teaching. Also, this knowledge aids teacher preparation programs in designing their courses and in recruiting the best candidates for teaching. This will help the Teacher Education Division in modifying the curriculum to enhance specific skills that a teacher must possess.

School and college administrators will also benefit from the findings of this study as it will help them to design in-service courses for teachers and lecturers to enhance and refresh their skills in specific areas. Additionally, recognizing what characteristics an excellent teacher embodies would assist school systems in recruiting the best possible instructors, which highly satisfies parents, administrators, and the general public. Lastly, this study provides a measure for how well teacher preparation programs are implementing technology and to what extent in-service teachers are using instructional media.

1.8 Limitation

Fifty-six respondents are post graduate students pursuing diploma in education July 2007 intake majoring in Science, Guidance and Counselling and Remedial Education in MWTI, Melaka. They have completed their Bachelor Degree in various universities in Malaysia. Their age ranges from 23 to 34 years old. The other two hundred and six respondents consist of secondary school leavers from secondary schools all over Peninsular Malaysia and are currently pursuing their foundation studies for one and a half year before embarking on a four-year degree in education program. These students major in Pre-school Studies, Special Education,

Remedial Studies and Mathematics. Their age ranges from 18 to 21 years. All the respondents are Malay in ethnic.

1.9 Definition

The following definitions are used for the words or phrases appeared in the study.

1.9.1 First Year Students

First Year Students consist of students from two programs currently offered in Malay Woman Training Institute in Melaka, Malaysia. The first program is the July 2007 intake where students pursuing diploma in education majoring in Science, Guidance and Counselling and Remedial Education in MWTI, Melaka. The other group consists of secondary school leavers from all over Peninsular Malaysia and are currently pursuing their foundation studies for one and a half year before embarking on a four-year degree in education program. These students major in Pre-school Studies, Special Education, Remedial Studies and Mathematics

1.9.2 Perceptions

Perceptions as defined in Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002) include the following definition.

- a particular of understanding or thinking about something
- the ability to notice something by seeing, hearing, smelling
- the ability to understand and make good judgments about something

For the purpose of this study, perceptions are referred to the qualities of an excellent teacher; what traits and teaching skills that an excellent teacher should possess.

1.9.3 Excellent teacher

Excellent teacher is defined as attributes and skills that make good, effective, likeable teacher and the type of teacher that the trainee teachers aspire to become. In this study, excellent teacher is defined as have mastery of their content areas, develop effective classroom management and discipline skills (Lemlech, 1995), possess consistent and respectable character (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Lickona, 1991). Excellence implies going beyond the norm, or the good - in essence, to excel, toward that which is better (Zarra, 2003).

1.9.4 Malay Women Training Institute (MWTI)

Malay Women Training Institute is the oldest teacher training college in Malaysia. It was built in 1935. This institute provides training for courses leading to degree level either through twinning programs with local or foreign universities. The institutes are also offered degree programs in education in several subjects. Other than courses offered full time, part time courses are also offered during the semester break. Short courses are offered to teachers in schools too. The uniqueness of the institute is all the pre-service teachers are females and Malay in ethnic. However, this does not apply to the in-service course teachers.

1.9.5 PPISMP

PPISMP is the abbreviation for the Preparation Program for the Bachelor Degree of Education. It is a one and a-half-year preparatory course in preparing teacher trainees for the four-year degree program.

1.9.6 KPLI

KPLI is the abbreviation for Post Graduate Teacher Training. It is equivalent to a Diploma in Education. It is an on-year course where students will obtain their Diploma Certificate that entitles them to be a qualified teacher.

1.10 Conclusion

This study investigates the personal traits and teaching skills that an excellent teacher should possess from the MWTI students' perspectives. It also examines what makes an excellent teacher – personal traits or teaching skills and if there is any difference of perceptions between KPLI and PPISMP students. This study adapted the questionnaire used by Johnson (2002) in her study of Examining High School and College Students' Perceptions of Excellent Teachers in The United States and in Spain.

Chapter 2 provides a broad overview of perspectives from various angles such as administrative, high school students, college/university students, pr-service teachers, teachers' role and the use of technology. The research methodology is outlined in Chapter 3 and a description of the participants, instrumentation, instrument reliability, data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the statistical analysis of data, personal traits and teaching skills of an excellent teacher from

MWTI students' perspectives while Chapter 5 presents the discussion, limitations and recommendation for future research.