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Teaching from the heart: an evaluation of award-winning teachers in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The Inspiring Teacher of English Award and the President's Award for Teachers are national awards that recognize outstanding Singapore educators. This paper delves into the practices and philosophies of six award-winning teachers, unravelling the intricacies that distinguish their pedagogical approaches. The study is centred around three pivotal themes: Student-centred instructional approach, Optimization of Curriculum Materials, and Heart for students. The teaching philosophy undergirds and informs the other two themes, providing the guiding principles that ensure a consistent, student-centred, and resource-effective approach in the classroom. Highlighting the adaptability of these educators in tailoring their methods to individual student needs, the paper emphasizes the significance of a sound educational philosophy as their guiding principle. Furthermore, it explores the adept integration of curriculum materials in their teaching. This analysis offers valuable insights into the unique qualities and teaching methodologies that contribute to the success of award-winning teachers, providing a nuanced understanding of their contribution to educational excellence. Additionally, this analysis suggests significant implications for teacher education and in-service professional development, highlighting the need for programmes that foster these key attributes and approaches, thereby enhancing teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes across educational settings.

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Introduction

Teaching is a profession that plays an integral role in shaping the minds of future generations. While all teachers strive to provide quality education, there are a select few who are recognized and celebrated as award-winning teachers. These exceptional educators exhibit extraordinary commitment, dedication, and innovation in their teaching practices, consistently exceeding the standard expectations of their roles. The recognition of outstanding educators with national teaching awards is, on one hand, an acknowledgement of the contribution of teachers to the education of the nation and, on the other hand, sometimes perceived to be a token exaltation of select individuals above the ranks of thousands of equally deserving teachers in the field. A study of award-winning teachers aims to ascertain and validate the unique characteristics that these teachers possess. In order for these identifiable attributes to be intentionally replicable in teacher education and professional development, it is essential that they are not specific to particular personality types, but as practices, attitudes and beliefs about pedagogy that can be taught, developed and applied.

In line with the ongoing efforts of the Ministry of Education, Singapore (hereafter MOE) “to nurture the joy of learning and develop multiple pathways to cater to the different strengths and interests” of its students (MOE, 2020c), there was a concerted effort to effect two shifts in the educational emphasis of the education system: 1) by “moving away from an over-emphasis on academic results” at the primary level (MOE, 2020d, para.1); and 2) moving towards a Full Subject-Based Banding (SBB) at the secondary level. This required the teachers at both primary and secondary levels to be fully equipped to deal with the changes in the educational landscape. MOE thus launched the SkillsFuture for Educators (SFEd) initiative on 4 March 2020. The long-term goals of this “professional development roadmap” are to “improve teachers’ competencies” and to “encourage lifelong learning” (MOE, 2020b, p. 8). The initiative acknowledges that “teachers are critical in ensuring the effective implementation of the curriculum and in facilitating our students’ learning”, and that this initiative is meant to “guide teachers in acquiring the necessary competencies”, “encourage them to deepen their mastery of skills”, and to strengthen “their classroom practices to better meet their students’ interests and needs” (MOE, 2020a, para. 17–18).

This focus on teachers’ skills is timely given the ministry’s fundamental belief that the quality of teachers is the determining factor in learning in the classroom. During the annual MOE work plan seminar 2009, the then Minister for Education Dr. Ng Eng Hen, stated that “[a] good education system depends on high quality teachers” (Ng, 2009, para. 46); ten years later, the former Director-General of Education, Wong Siew Hoong affirmed the vital importance of teachers: “Teachers are instrumental in moulding the future of our nation” (MOE, 2019, para. 3). More recently, the current Minister for Education, Chan Chun Sing, stated in no uncertain terms that teachers “are fundamental to how Singapore continues to have education as an uplifting force, as a force that unites our country, as a force that convinces generations of Singaporeans that we can all be equal and proud, regardless of our starting position in life” (Chan, 2022, para. 32). This places the onus of enhancing the quality of teaching on professional development and teacher education.

This study aims to evaluate the qualities and characteristics that contribute to the success of award-winning teachers; it is driven by the goal of ascertaining the attributes of excellence, as measured by the proxy measures of national teaching awards. In a sense, it provides a snapshot of what quality pedagogical practice may look like. This evaluation allows us to ascertain if there are similarities in the quality teaching approaches (in both instructional practices and use of curriculum materials) across different grades or if there are systematic differences due to the grade levels. This will enable us to have deeper insights into how expert teachers address issues related to the students and the current milieu and context in which teaching occurs.

Research background

Impact of teachers

Hattie’s (2003) study found six major sources of variance in student’s achievement; of the six, four of the sources (home, schools, principals & peer effects) contribute to 20% of student success, leaving two sources contributing to 80% of the variance – students themselves (50%) and their teachers (30%). This posits that, other than the students themselves, the single largest variance which has an impact on student learning and achievement is the teacher. Numerous studies over the years have systematically corroborated the significance of the teacher (Mincu, 2015; OECD, 2012; Sahlberg, 2010; A. B. M. Tsui, 2009a; Xu et al., 2022). Sahlberg (2010) attributes his country’s educational success to its teachers who he believes “are the main reason Finland now leads the international pack in literacy, science, and math” (p.1). Teachers play a central role in the classroom, both as educators and leaders. The teacher’s agentive power, or ability to act on their own behalf, shapes the classroom environment in a significant way. They possess the power to create a positive learning environment where students feel motivated, engaged, and supported. Conversely, they are capable of creating a negative learning environment where students feel afraid, anxious, and discouraged.

Studies have indicated the distinct differences between the novice and expert teachers (see A. B. M. Tsui, 2009a), but there are also differences between experienced non-expert teachers and expert teachers. The studies which merely contrast expert and novice teachers ignore the fact that even though some teachers have more years of experience, they do not necessarily become expert teachers. This was alluded to by Hattie (2003) – “[w]e work on the absurd assumption that all teachers are equal, which is patently not true to any child, any parent, any principal, and known by all teachers” (p. 15). A. B. M. Tsui (2009b) highlighted this fact explicitly – “experience does not entail expertise” (p.191). In fact, she refers to such teachers as “experienced non-experts” (A. B. M. Tsui, 2009b, 2022). In the first substantial look at expertise, A. B. M. Tsui (2003) examined the nature of expertise in language teaching, its development, and how teachers employ their expertise. She did this through a detailed study of the classroom practices of four expert language teachers. In it, A. B. M. Tsui (2003) identified four key components of expertise in language teaching:

- (1) Deep knowledge of language and teaching;
- (2) Ability to diagnose student needs and develop appropriate instruction;
- (3) Ability to create a positive and supportive learning environment;
- (4) Ability to reflect on and improve their teaching.

A. B. M. Tsui (2003) also discussed the development of expertise in language teaching, arguing that expertise is not simply a matter of experience. Rather, it is a complex process that involves the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Pedagogical content knowledge

Various studies (Lee & Yuan, 2021; Neumann et al., 2019; A. B. Tsui, 2005; Turner-Bisset, 2001) have highlighted the importance of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) – a specialized knowledge base at the intersection of subject matter knowledge (what they know about what they teach), pedagogical knowledge (what they know about teaching), and knowledge of the students (Shulman, 1986). According to Shulman (1986, 1987), PCK is a significant and major component of teaching expertise. Comprising “ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others ... [and] an understanding of what makes the learning of specific concepts easy or difficult” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9), PCK encompasses the specialized knowledge that teachers develop to effectively deliver subject matter content in ways that make it comprehensible to students. This includes understanding what makes specific topics difficult or easy to learn, the misconceptions that students might hold, and the most effective ways to address these challenges through teaching strategies, representations, and explanations. PCK essentially lies at the intersection of how teachers integrate their subject matter knowledge and their pedagogical knowledge (Gudmundsdottir, 1991; Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987), but Shulman (1987) highlights that this must align with the knowledge and conceptions teachers have of teaching their learners. As it involves knowledge of how language instruction should be organized for learning purposes rather than a focus on the quantity and quality of knowledge for a given subject, PCK is a form of knowledge that makes language teachers good teachers rather than language or linguistic experts/specialists.

The development of PCK is critical for teachers as it allows them to transform their subject matter knowledge into teachable content. Research has shown that teachers with strong PCK are better able to anticipate student difficulties, provide clearer explanations, and utilize more effective instructional strategies (Ball et al., 2008). Furthermore, PCK is dynamic and evolves with experience and reflection. Teachers continuously refine their PCK through classroom practice, professional development, and collaboration with peers. In the field of school mathematics, Ball and her colleagues expanded and refined Shulman’s construct of pedagogical content knowledge to include three sub-domains: knowledge of content and students, knowledge of content and teaching, and knowledge of content and curriculum (Ball et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2008). Schneider (2015) offers a nuanced perspective on

PCK from the standpoint of a science teacher educator. She introduces the concept of learning progressions as a framework to organize and enhance teacher learning over time. This framework focuses on how to intentionally progress teacher learning by connecting theoretical understanding with practical application. This practice-based approach ensures that teachers' educative experiences build upon their initial knowledge and progressively develop their expertise. Schneider (2015) highlights the importance of aligning programme experiences with real classroom challenges and providing continuous professional development, thereby preparing teachers to effectively address authentic problems in teaching and foster student learning. This framework aims to foster continuous professional growth and effective science teaching.

Beyond a knowledge of subject and pedagogy, PCK includes a knowledge of curriculum and its wider implications to the classroom. More recently, Deng (2018) further reconceptualizes PCK by integrating curriculum thinking into teachers' understanding of content within the institutional curriculum framework. Deng emphasizes the importance of curriculum thinking and a theory of content in guiding teachers to identify educational potential and cultivate students' intellectual and moral powers. This approach highlights the need for teachers to effectively interpret and enact curriculum content. By reconceptualizing PCK through this lens, Deng advocates for a more holistic understanding of teachers' professional knowledge, emphasizing the need for curriculum thinking that is informed by a comprehensive theory of content to achieve meaningful educational outcomes.

It is evident that PCK remains a critical component of teaching expertise, evolving through the contributions of various scholars and researchers. Shulman's foundational work laid the groundwork for understanding the intersection of content knowledge and pedagogy, while subsequent expansions by Ball and her colleagues have refined PCK to encompass specific domains such as knowledge of content and students, teaching, and curriculum. Schneider's (2015) perspective emphasizes the importance of learning progressions and practice-based approaches in teacher education, highlighting the need for continuous professional development aligned with real classroom challenges. Deng (2018) further broadens the scope by integrating curriculum thinking into PCK, advocating for a holistic approach that combines curriculum theory with pedagogical practice. Together, these insights underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of PCK, reinforcing its essential role in developing effective teaching practices that foster meaningful student learning outcomes.

The ability to tap on PCK in teaching is dependent on how PCK aligns with and informs one's teaching philosophy. The next section examines how teachers' beliefs and values about teaching and learning shape their instructional practices and interactions with students.

Teaching philosophy

Educational research traditionally focuses on classroom practices which are observable and accessible. Chism (1998) describes teaching philosophy as essentially "descriptions of how the teachers think learning occurs, how they think they can intervene in this process, what chief goals they have for students, and what actions they take to implement their intentions" (p. 2). Crookes (2010) posits that a philosophy of teaching "should go beyond a mere statement of methodological preferred practices" (p. 1127) and should express a "broader, more encompassing, and more institutionally and historically located entity" (Crookes, 2015, p. 486). This may include a set of beliefs, bodies of knowledge, perspectives, positions, principles, attitudes and values about what education means, the role of the teacher in the learning process, and the fundamental goals of teaching, learning and assessment.

While there is growing interest in desirable attributes of a teacher and determining teacher identity in terms of teacher typology, professional behaviour and personality (Göncz, 2017), less attention has been paid to how teacher philosophy shapes pedagogical practices, impacts student outcomes and influences the overall learning experience for students. This philosophy, informed by both theory and praxis, and shaped by broader life experiences, socio-cultural environments and personal ideology and ethics, aligns a teacher with broader educational contexts including the

congruence between his/her attitude towards the ethos of the educational institution he/she teaches in, the subject he/she has to teach, the wider nationwide policies of the education system, and the external societal pressures of the roles and expectations of a teacher. Because it is personal, varied and evolves over time, a philosophy of teaching guides teachers to make consistent pedagogical decisions as they adapt to changing educational landscapes and varying student profiles, thus helping them to stay true to their core values, principles and personas as educators.

Since Hattie's (2003) review of non-subject specific expert teachers, there has been a limited number of studies examining the practices of expert EL teachers. Hirvela and Belcher (2022) see this as an "important missing element" (p. 1), and A. B. M. Tsui (2022) acknowledged the importance of closing this "expertise gap". This study aims to contribute to this lacuna by examining the impact of teachers through the lens of PCK and teaching philosophy. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the teaching practices of award-winning EL teachers to discover commonalities in their teaching behaviours, pedagogical decisions, and the rationale behind those decisions. By doing so, it seeks to highlight how PCK and teaching philosophies influence effective teaching practices, ultimately enhancing our understanding of what makes expert teachers impactful. The research questions which guide this study are:

- (1) What are some distinct qualities that award winning teachers possess?
- (2) What considerations influence their choice of instructional practices?

Methodology

The only research study on "expert" teachers in Singapore was carried out more than three decades ago (Chen, 1990), and, even then, the sampling of the "expert" teachers was not systematic, as it was based on the researcher's own subjective criteria, and it conflated experience with expertise in teaching. This weakness of not basing the choice of teachers being studied as expert teachers on "a rigorous and extensive assessment process" was highlighted by Hattie (2003, p. 15). In this study, the national teaching awards are used as a proxy measure for the selection of expert teachers; this decision was made because there is a rigorous vetting process for identifying and determining these national award winners.

Established in 2008, the Inspiring Teacher of English Award (ITEA) is the first and only national award for recognizing EL teachers in Singapore, who ignite a love for the English language, and are effective in helping their students speak and write accurately. These teachers are passionate about enacting innovative learner-centred approaches which are underpinned by knowledge bases appropriate to learner's readiness, interests and learning profiles to make English interesting, relevant and engaging. Another criterion is that these expert teachers are committed to constant efforts to upgrade themselves to develop their teaching competencies to enact classroom practices in alignment with the syllabuses and curriculum, in order to benefit their students and schools.

Inaugurated in 1998, the President's Award for Teachers (PAT) is the profession's highest honour and "recognizes outstanding educators for their dedication and hard work in nurturing our young" (MOE, 2023). It pays tribute to experienced teachers for their role in moulding the future of our nation. As role models for the teaching profession, they demonstrate a deep passion for teaching and inspire both their students and peers through their words and deeds. For both awards, teachers are nominated and then judged by a panel consisting of MOE leaders.

Selection of participants

We shortlisted recipients of the ITEA and the PAT who taught English Language at primary and secondary schools. Some awardees did not respond, declined to participate or were no longer in the teaching profession. Others had been promoted to administrative school leadership positions, or had transitioned to non-teaching roles within the larger MOE, or were seconded to external

Table 1. Distribution of award-winning teachers in the study.

	ITEA	PAT
Primary EL teachers	Teacher A Teacher B	Teacher C Teacher D
Secondary EL teachers	Teacher E Teacher F	-

organizations. This is understandable given the high regard in which these awardees are held due to the nature of their awards. Four ITEA and two PAT awardees were willing to participate in this study (see Table 1).

Research methodology & analysis

The study used interviews and lesson observations for data generation and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The open-ended semi-structured interviews enabled us to understand the decisions and rationale that the award-winning teachers had with regard to their enactment of the curriculum. Two interviews of approximately 60 minutes were conducted: the first before the lesson observations was intended to clarify and elaborate the teacher’s beliefs, values and practices, and the second, held after the lesson observations, aimed to elucidate teacher intentions and actions from the class observations. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. Each teacher was observed over four double periods – twice for the teaching of Reading and twice for the teaching of Writing across two units of study.¹ The lessons were video-recorded and observation notes were used for team analysis.

To finalize the themes, a comprehensive team discussion was held. Initially, the themes generated from the lesson observations were identified and documented. Concurrently, themes from the interview transcriptions were analysed independently. During the team discussion, each member presented their thematic findings from both the interviews and the lesson observations. Through a collaborative and iterative process, the team compared and contrasted the themes from the different data sources, seeking convergence in the patterns observed. Discrepancies were discussed in depth to reach a consensus on the most accurate interpretation of the data. This collaborative analysis ensured that the final themes were robust, reflective of the data, and encompassed the multifaceted nature of the teachers’ practices and rationales. Ultimately, this rigorous process resulted in the three finalized themes that were deemed to accurately represent the core insights of the study.

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Findings and discussion

The award-winning teachers in this study exhibit a distinct set of qualities and characteristics that contribute to their success in the field of education. These qualities, which are consistent across

different grade levels, are encapsulated in three main themes: Student-centred instructional approach, Optimization of Curriculum Materials, and Heart for students. The themes identified were consistent across grade levels, indicating no systematic differences in the attributes of expert teachers at varying educational stages.

Student-centered instructional approach

In our exploration of instructional practices that award-winning teachers use in teaching reading comprehension and writing and the consideration that influence their classroom pedagogy, the study identified three distinguishing approaches of the award-winning EL teachers:

- (1) Teaching practices were scaffolded and tailored to the grade levels and specific needs of their students.
- (2) There was an emphasis on ensuring that learning is relevant.
- (3) There was effective and thoughtful use of formative assessment and feedback.

The teachers meticulously planned and delivered their lessons, taking into account the students' abilities and limitations, and balancing their instructional strategies to best address their learners' proficiencies. Language strategies and skills were explicitly taught, with variations and levels of scaffolding adjusted according to the students' learning needs and grade levels. Compared to Teachers E and F who taught higher grade levels, Teachers A to D provided more explicit instruction at the lower grade levels. Additional scaffolding was used by all the teachers to support less proficient learners during lessons. Teacher D, for example, shared "my class writing is very scaffolded because some of them may not know how to write . . . but they can be involved in idea generation . . . So I scaffold slowly". Teacher C expressed that it is crucial to "know the different kinds of learners that we have" and hence with that knowledge, "we cater to that learners' differentiation", so that she can "help them to be more engaged". This finding aligns with the studies conducted by Mohan et al. (2008) and Xu et al. (2022), which indicate that effective teachers provide an appropriate level of scaffolding to support student learning.

Language learning was also made meaningful for students through contextualization. In both the teachers' explanations and the observed lessons, language learning was frequently applied to authentic or real-life contexts, enabling students to better understand the connections between the material learned and its application in real-world situations. For example, Teacher E shared that "we need to teach language in the context of where students will encounter them", so as "to help them get a better handle on the world around them". Similarly, Teacher B shared that "through a variety of rich and contextualized activities, we can cultivate their [students'] interest in learning English . . . where they're able to relate whatever they're learning with the world around them". The teachers foregrounded the relevance of language to expression, knowledge acquisition and to everyday use. Recognizing the importance of student buy-in, these teachers created authentic, real-world experiences and connections, enhancing engagement and demonstrating the practical applications of learning (Farinde Wu et al., 2017). As Graves (2000) posits, objective needs may not be met if subjective needs (e.g., helping them to see the relevance of what they need to learn for their lives outside the four walls of school) are not taken into account. By designing their teaching approach and curriculum materials with students' interests in mind, award-winning teachers prioritize students in all their pedagogical decisions.

Putting students first in instruction resulted in assessment and forward-feeding feedback becoming integral features in all of these teachers' classrooms. These educators consistently used assessment to gauge student understanding and provide timely, constructive feedback that guided future learning. The following statements revealed a strong belief in the crucial role of assessment and feedback in enhancing student learning outcomes and driving instructional decisions:

Teacher F: “I use quite a bit of peer assessment, peer feedback. ... because when they do peer feedback, they are learning from a peer, a fellow classmate. ... if you [the student] give very good quality feedback, you learn and at the same time, the other peer also learn. Your friend also learns from you. ... it’s [also] confidence building and that confidence building is something that you really need to also consider in language learning”.

Teacher B: “It’s very important to be good in assessing the progress of the students, so you’ll be able to know how to close the gaps and bring the best out of each of them, leveraging on their strengths”.

Assessment and feedback has been found to be a critical ingredient in the repertoire of expert teachers (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Grant et al., 2013). By incorporating these elements, the teachers ensured that their instructional practices were responsive to the needs and progress of their students, fostering a more effective and supportive learning environment.

All the teachers in the study placed their students at the core of language instruction and their enactment practices. While all pre-service teachers are taught student-centric approaches, with emphasis on scaffolding and formative assessment, award-winning teachers prioritize student-centric approaches in all their lessons even after many years of teaching. They resisted the pressures of the system to revert to the dominant didactic and examination-oriented approaches highlighted many times by the CORE research studies (Hogan et al., 2013; Kwek et al., 2022; Towndrow et al., 2015). Their² lesson observations demonstrated a skilful and smooth enactment of the three approaches in both reading comprehension and writing lessons, which attest to their regular use. Their students were familiar with their teachers’ approaches and were not puzzled or caught unaware by these routines. Furthermore, the interview responses attest to their rationale for such practices. The teachers in the study not only displayed good knowledge of their learners, they also considered the needs of their learners in their lesson enactment, as highlighted by Teacher A: “I really make it a point to find out more about the curriculum and explore how best I can cater to my learners’ needs”. This passion for teaching students is contagious, as it inspires and motivates students to actively engage in their education, fostering a positive and enthusiastic learning environment.

Optimization of curriculum materials

In a number of studies on curriculum materials use (Loh & Renandya, 2015; Loh et al., 2023), teachers tend to adopt the “good-teacher doctrine”, which “promotes an image of teachers as solo performers and of curriculum resources as dispensable props” (Remillard, 2016, p. 36). By eschewing curriculum as an option, and/or viewing curriculum materials as a hindrance, this creates artificial barriers between teachers and their potential collaborators. As pointed out by Remillard (2016), curriculum materials “offer the teacher a high-level map of the domain and learning pathways within and around it”; in fact, the effectiveness of curriculum materials “depends on teachers using them and making appropriate adaptations in the process” (p. 37).

A key finding from these award-winning teachers in their use of curriculum materials is the fact that they recognize the value and positively optimize the curriculum materials provided by MOE, i.e., STELLAR and VAP.³ This aligns with Remillard’s view that while curriculum materials can never fully replace teachers or quality teaching, they can and do provide a strong foundation from which teachers can draw (Remillard, 2016). Teacher E admitted that the VAP “has helped [him] to focus more on how to break down a text” and be “more intentional about reading the text first” rather than focusing on the comprehension questions, which is a dominant practice in many schools, including his previous school, which he felt had “caved [in] to the needs of exam preparation”. Similarly, Teacher F, a Head of the English Language Department, highlighted the fact that “[we] use it (VAP) in our planning stages” and that “the use of VAP ... is a marriage between the materials that we select from VAP to merge with our existing and new school-based materials”. This meeting-point between

subject resources and curriculum intention, and teacher identity and instructional objectives is the sweet spot that negotiates national desired outcomes and personal flexibility and creativity.

The effective partnership of curriculum materials and the teacher is when students' needs are considered first and foremost:

Teacher A: "I really make it a point to find out more about the curriculum and explore how best I can cater to my learners' needs".

Teacher C: "STELLAR is fantastic. Everything is there, but you need to know where your learners are at and then, you need to provide that additional support. So that's where I come in. And then, you need to add that part where you can engage them".

These teachers exemplify Remillard's (2016) assertion that the effectiveness of curriculum materials hinges on their application by teachers. By thoughtfully adapting these materials, the teachers ensure they meet their students' diverse learning needs without causing significant deviations from the original intent of the syllabus, thus preserving the core essence of the language education programme (Loh et al., 2023). This balanced approach highlights the teachers' skill in customizing curriculum content to enhance its relevance and accessibility, while maintaining the integrity and educational goals of the original curriculum materials.

Heart for students

A key aspect of a language teacher's philosophy is understanding the purpose and goals behind teaching language (Crookes, 2015). The teachers in this study aim to instil excitement, joy (Teacher F), passion (Teacher A), and love (Teacher D) for learning English in their students. They unanimously resist the "assessment preparation cycles" (Teacher E), instead emphasizing the learning experience and process over the final product (Teacher D). This approach focuses on fostering metacognitive awareness, encouraging students to think critically about their answers (Teacher B). Teacher D asserts that learning should be a lifelong endeavour, not merely preparation for exams such as the Primary 3 or Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) emphasizing that "learning is for life".

Teacher A cautions against the counterproductive nature of focusing solely on good examination results through drilling as this can diminish students' passion for the language and their overall development. Despite their varied motivations, the teachers are united in their commitment to making language learning relevant, authentic, and meaningful. They strive to make content relevant to students' lives by incorporating real-life examples, general knowledge, and discussions of real-world issues (Farinde Wu et al., 2017). Teacher E believes that effective communication skills can make students more informed, empathetic, and better human beings, aiming to equip them with metacognitive tools to critically engage with the language of others.

To Teacher D, language facilitates deeper conversations, inquiry, and self-expression, anchoring identity and confidence. The teachers view language as a life skill, suggesting that examinations and grades often fail to align with real-life applications and can hinder the joy of learning. Teacher A notes, "it's meaningless if they are just learning for exams", while Teacher E highlights a disconnect between school teachings and real-world applications. Teacher B uses the metaphor of a sponge to describe student engagement, where students learn out of genuine interest rather than compulsion. Overall, these teachers emphasize the importance of connecting classroom learning to students' real-world experiences to foster genuine engagement and lifelong learning.

Based on their educational philosophy, teachers may prefer certain learning theories and instructional methods over others. Similar to findings in other studies of award-winning teachers, the teachers in this study believed that "students were at the heart of all academic decisions" and

“recognized the importance of student buy-in and prioritized student involvement and participation” (Farinde Wu et al., 2017, p. 291):

Teacher C: “We don’t give up on our students. And [it is] very important to care for them . . . because if you show them that you care, they will do things for you, even though they don’t really believe in that. . . . I think . . . having a heart for the students is very, very critical”.

Teacher D: “For students who give up easily, . . . I want to affirm them, not because they failed English, but . . . because [they] showed resilience. And I told the child that ‘although you didn’t pass . . . you have showed resilience, and for me that is so good. So, let’s work on the next step”.

Teacher E: “[S]tudents need to feel safe that they are allowed to share their opinions, even if their opinions are contrary to yours. So if you present yourself as someone who is always going to jump on every infraction, then I feel that this has a subconscious effect on how safe they feel when it comes to presenting opinions, because that’s really deeply personal, right?”

This student-centred approach optimizes the diverse needs, interests, backgrounds, strengths, and individuality of their students. Such interactions and expectations foster a positive and inclusive learning environment where the teacher acts as a mentor, facilitator, or guide, rather than the primary source and authority of knowledge.

The teachers’ belief in their students’ potential and capabilities positions students as influential and instrumental figures in the classroom. “Students’ opinions and perspectives were highly valued and their interests often drove curriculum development” (Farinde Wu et al., 2017, p. 290). Teacher B emphasizes the importance of understanding students by advising other teachers to “learn more about them first”. The teachers collectively agree that addressing the socio-emotional needs of students is essential before engaging them cognitively. They advocate for teachers to “reach out to the learners first” (Teacher A) and to “validate their feelings” (Teacher E). Teacher D highlights that students may not be engaged because “they have their baggage” and may be dealing with personal issues that affect their learning. Overall, these insights underscore the importance of a student-centred philosophy that prioritizes the holistic development of learners.

Conclusion & implications

The award-winning teachers are driven by a genuine passion for teaching, which is a crucial element of their Pedagogical Content Knowledge. They possess a deep love for their subject matter and a strong desire to instil a love for learning in their students. Their instructional practices reflect this passion as they effectively integrate their subject matter knowledge with their pedagogical skills (Lee & Yuan, 2021; Shulman, 1987; A. B. Tsui, 2005). This integration allows them to make the curriculum relevant and engaging, employing strategies that are informed by their understanding of what makes content comprehensible and meaningful. By prioritizing the holistic development of their students and addressing both cognitive and socio-emotional needs, these teachers exemplify the dynamic and multifaceted nature of PCK in practice.

Secondly, the award-winning teachers optimize the curriculum materials provided by MOE, such as “Strategies for English Language and Reading” (STELLAR) and “Voices at Play” (VAP), viewing them not as “shackles” but as valuable supports (Valencia et al., 2006). These teachers see the value in these materials and thoughtfully adapt them to meet their students’ diverse learning needs without causing significant deviations from the original intent, thus preserving the core essence of the programme (Loh et al., 2023; Remillard, 2016). By integrating their deep

understanding of PCK and their commitment to making learning relevant and meaningful, they ensure that the curriculum materials enhance, rather than constrain, their instructional practices. This balanced approach highlights their skill in customizing curriculum content to enhance its relevance and accessibility, while maintaining the integrity and educational goals of the original materials (Deng, 2018).

Finally, for award-winning teachers, showing care for their students is at the core of their teaching philosophy. They understand the significance of building strong relationships with their students, recognizing that establishing a positive and supportive rapport is essential for effective teaching and learning. These teachers place students at the heart of all academic decisions, emphasizing the importance of addressing socio-emotional needs before engaging students cognitively. They prioritize student involvement and participation, creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment where students feel valued, respected, and motivated to succeed (Farinde Wu et al., 2017). By acting as mentors, facilitators, and guides rather than mere authorities, they foster an environment where students' opinions and perspectives drive curriculum development, further demonstrating their commitment to making learning relevant and meaningful. This holistic, student-centred approach reflects their deep commitment to their students' well-being and overall development.

We must acknowledge that the qualities exemplified by award-winning teachers are not confined to those who receive formal recognition. In countless classrooms, there are teachers who also demonstrate remarkable passion, adaptability, and student-centred approaches, profoundly impacting educational experiences of students. These teachers, though perhaps unrecognized, create environments that are rich in meaningful learning experiences and nurture their students.

In conclusion, building strong relationships with students is a crucial aspect of becoming an award-winning teacher. These educators prioritize creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment where students feel valued, respected, and motivated to succeed. By fostering trust and demonstrating empathy, award-winning teachers establish strong connections with their students, contributing to a positive and supportive learning environment that empowers students to reach their full potential. This represents the "heart" of expert teachers. While student-centric teaching strategies and effective use of curriculum materials can be incorporated into teacher education and in-service professional development courses, the question remains whether this "heart for students" can also be cultivated.

The potential implications of this are significant. If teacher education programmes and professional development initiatives can find ways to foster this deep commitment to students' well-being, the impact on educational outcomes could be profound. Future research could explore methods for instilling this "heart" in preservice teachers, perhaps through a combination of mentorship programmes, reflective practice, and exposure to intentionally chosen positive role models (such as these award-winning teachers). This is akin to what Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) suggest: "learning to teach occurs most productively within professional communities including, for instance, experienced colleagues who work with cohorts of student teachers" (p. 122). However, even though these teachers "can be especially powerful influences on learning", it does not mean any "experienced" teacher will do. In fact, a more deliberate and thoughtful approach to practicum placements with an intentional selection of well-prepared mentors is crucial in fostering this "heart". In fact, this was alluded to by Hiebert and Morris (2012) when they consider that "training teachers to acquire the core practices of teaching – would benefit significantly from placing the training directly into the context of studying and improving instructional products" (p. 99).

Ultimately, recognizing and nurturing the "heart" of teaching could lead to a more compassionate, student-centred approach in classrooms, enhancing not only academic achievement but also the overall school experience for students. As educators and policymakers consider these possibilities, it is essential to remember that the foundation of effective teaching lies in the genuine care and connection between teachers and their students. Therefore, integrating this element into teacher education and professional development programmes should be a priority for future educational reforms for this to remain a critical consideration for the future of teacher education.

Notes

1. Each class period spans 30 minutes; double periods span 60 minutes.
2. The CORE Research Programme at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, is “a multilevel analysis of Singaporean schooling, pedagogy, youth, and educational outcomes” (SingTeach, 2005, para.2); essentially, it aims “to observe, analyse and understand what happens in Singapore classrooms” (SingTeach, 2018, para.5). As the research programme seeks “[t]o understand instructional core”, it is termed the CORE research programme (para.5).
3. The curriculum materials provided for Primary schools are part of the national language education programme – STELLAR (Strategies for English language And Reading); those from the Secondary level are part of the VAP (“Voices at Play”) package.

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