

EFFECTIVE OBSERVATION AND CRITICAL REFLECTION (A Snapshot)

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What do pre-service teachers learn from their observation stint during school experience attachment? This paper will present insights into the cognitive contents of the pre-service teachers' reflection log. Preliminary analyses revealed that different cultures and pedagogical practices were observed to be in operation in different school contexts. This paper will discuss the teacher trainees' perspectives of their experiential learning and critical reflection during their school experience. It will present a retrospective analysis of the subjects' reflective thoughts on the following aspects that they had observed: their cooperating teachers' practices in class, the running of the school organization, setting their own goals and the charting of their own development as trainee teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that pre-service teachers tend to adopt the philosophy and the pedagogical practices of their cooperating teachers. This is not surprising as their knowledge of pedagogical practices anchors on their past experiences when they were students themselves years back. As part of the initial teacher training course, the one-week of school experience (under the old structure) provides them with the opportunity to see how educational theory is

exemplified into current practices in actual Singapore primary school settings.

OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION

The practice of observation is well supported by literature as one of the useful means to help pre-service teachers see the relevance of educational theories being practised in the classrooms. The assigned observation learning during their school experience is an important phase in the pre-service teacher training programme. However, the most critical component of observation is reflection; a reflective thinking process. Once the beginning or practising teachers are in the school system, many things are constrained by time. They will not have the luxury of available time to watch other experienced teachers at their craft and reflect on what they can incorporate and discard from these experiences. Normally, though the stint of the school experience is relatively short, the pre-service teachers still could try out their intended approach under the guidance and supervision of their cooperating teachers (CTs) and school coordinating mentor (SCM).

The importance of making a record of their observations while observing indeed helps them remember events and notice any generalized patterns evolved from their observation in the assigned school classrooms (Borich, 1999). The process of recording thoughts about the observation experience, writing critical reflection journals and discussion with their peers during and after the school experience is indeed a pivotal training phase for future practicum.

Critical reflection involves three basic elements on the part of the observers;

- reflecting on daily observation teachers' pedagogical practices
- setting goals and
- charting own professional development

The critical reflection process could be facilitated by the ‘experiential learning cycle’ suggested by Dewey (1963) and developed by David Kolb (in Petty, 2004), see (Figure 1). A learner (the pre-service teacher) may begin at any point, however, the sequence of each phase should be strictly adhered to.

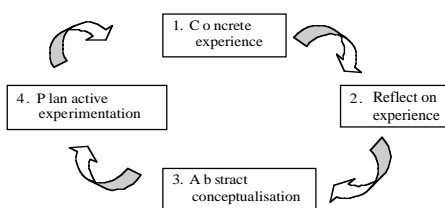


Figure 1: The experiential or reflective learning cycle

The ‘concrete experience’ (CE) phase should be used by pre-service teachers to test out new teaching ideas and approaches/ techniques rather than merely reproducing well-established procedures thoughtlessly. They could also be looking for things or events which they have not paid any attention to prior to this school experience.

The subsequent phase, ‘reflection on experience’ (RE) entails a systematic and objective evaluation of the CE; along with an analysis of the pre-service teachers’ feelings at that point of time. In short, the pre-service teachers become ‘reflective practitioners’. The provision of a simple checklist (see Appendix A) would be most valuable to them. This checklist has a dual purpose of helping the pre-service teachers to be more focused on the areas for reflection and guiding their effort in the right direction. This purposeful activity encourages the pre-service teachers to be responsible for their own learning.

Having observation notes recorded in daily logs and reflection journals while the content is still reasonably fresh serves as a useful

way of salvaging on-site experience. The learner should take a step further to evaluate the exposure of teaching experience observed or taught and discover in what areas the activities or the executed moves were effective, or ineffective.

The third phase, 'abstract conceptualisation' (AC) relates CE to educational theories; such as "Why certain activities or tasks motivate the students more than others? What would happen if these activities or tasks were done in a different way?"

Finally, the planning active experimentation' (PAE) phase; brings lesson delivery to a higher and more effective level through taking positive actions. The pre-service teachers should identify the enabling factors or conditions and ensure their presence to facilitate pupils' learning. Similarly, they should identify the disabling factors or conditions and remove them. Questions such as "What would happen if I do it differently? and Should I 'experiment with new methods, styles or techniques in order to improve the or my teaching?" should form part of their daily reflective thinking process.

TEACHER-TRAINING IN THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is the sole training institution for teachers. As Singapore education landscape changes; inevitably, teacher training in NIE will have to respond to the challenges of this new education landscape. With the new semester in July, 2005, all pre-service teachers in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programmes will be assigned to schools for *a month of school experience* before they commence their training. With a longer exposure, they will experience a more diverse observation dynamics among the cooperating and experienced teachers' pedagogical practices. This rich pool of practices hopefully could provide a base for them to draw on when educational theories and their relationship are discussed on their return to start their initial teacher training course through active reflective thinking.

Uniquely to Singapore, all our pre-service teachers are employees of the Ministry of Education (MOE). They draw monthly salary which commensurate with their entry academic qualifications and they enjoy almost identical privileges accorded to a public civil servant.

THE INITIAL TEACHER-TRAINING PROGRAMME AT NIE

Three primary initial teacher-training programmes are offered by NIE leading to a range of qualifications from diplomas to bachelor degrees to postgraduate degrees in education. The primary Postgraduate Diploma in Education [PGDE(P)] programme is one of the three primary school teacher training programmes; the other two being

- Bachelor of Arts(Education); BA(Ed) or Bachelor of Science(Education); BSc (Ed) and
- Diploma in Education; (Dip Ed)

The PGDE(P) is the shortest in duration among the three, it is a one academic year programme. The BA/BSc(Ed) programme is a 4-year course, while the Dip Ed programme is a 2-year full-time course. At NIE, everyone in the PGDE(P) programme has to take Mathematics Curriculum Studies (CS) as one of their two compulsory teaching subjects for primary school teaching, the other being English and the third subject could be one of the following: science, social studies, art, music and physical education. Unlike the other two programmes, the pre-service teachers do not need to offer academic subjects as they already have the content knowledge from their university education. However, with the implementation of the new structure in the coming semester, those who wish to specialize in upper primary teaching will have to take content modules.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The entry level to this programme is a university degree in any discipline from a recognised university. Hence, the mathematics content knowledge of these pre-service teachers is very diverse. A random tutorial group was chosen to take part in this preliminary study. There were 22 pre-service teachers; seven of whom are males and the rest are females. Most had some experience in teaching either as contract or relief teachers before their entry to the programme. Their stint ranges from three months to slightly over a year. However, some 40% of this tutorial group did not have any teaching experience, (see Figure 2). Hence, the school experience is a very important exposure for them to learn from the practising ‘experts’ and have some hand-on experience too.

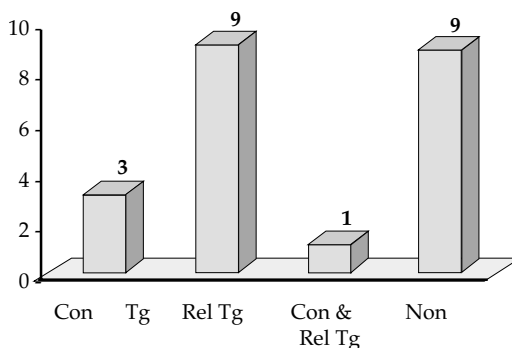


Figure 2: Teaching Experience prior to NIE entry Training prior to School Experience

The mathematics curriculum studies (CS) module is an eight-academic unit (AUs) course where the pre-service teachers are taught primary mathematics pedagogy. After attending lectures and tutorials for about eight weeks which approximates to about 30 to 40% of their course work, including the other two CS, general education and technology modules, they were randomly posted to

schools for a week long school experience (this study is based on the 2004 programme structure).

The one-week school experience aims to equip the pre-service teachers with the essential skills to function well in classrooms through observational learning. *Observational learning* equivalent to *imitation* literally refers to the copying of another person's behaviour (the CTs' and SCM's pedagogical practices). It is one of the powerful means of experiential learning.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCE (SEP 13TH TO 18TH 2004)

The Practicum Office oversees the pre-service teachers' posting to schools for the school experience as well as the practicum. It sets the tasks for the pre-service teachers to do during their one-week school experience; there are mainly two components:

- Enquiring and Reflecting based on
 - i) Studying and reflecting on school philosophy and objectives, practices and procedures, etc. through discussions with principal, vice-principal, heads of departments, level heads, subject coordinators and experienced teachers.

Looking at facilities in the school, e.g., science laboratories, subject rooms, media rooms, computer laboratories and lecture theatre.

- Observing and Recording
 - i) Observing CTs (and other experienced teachers, where possible), to identify and analyze teaching roles - e.g., planning, managing, communicating, instructing and evaluating.
 - ii) Observing and recording specific pupil behaviours and teacher-pupil interaction.

80% of their school experience time is spent in observing the cooperating teachers' pedagogical practices while the rest of the time is allocated to expose them to actual teaching under the guidance of the CTs and SCM. While these pre-service teachers are at the observation mode, are they skilful in their observation? In order to help them make meaningful relational connections between the educational theories and the pedagogical practices, a semi-structured observation guideline (designed by the author) is given.

The set task: for each pre-service teacher consists of two components; a daily reflection log on the daily encounters or events, observation or teaching of other subjects (Appendix B) and a more detailed Mathematics reflection journal on the mathematics lessons observed or taught (Appendix C). These were submitted on the completion of their school experience.

Data were collected through the submission of these *daily school experience logs* and *mathematics reflection journals*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 22 schools which the pre-service teachers were attached to are fairly evenly distributed among the four zones in Singapore. This accounts for about 12% of the total number of primary schools in Singapore. The south and north zone; each has five of the allocated schools while the east and west zone each has six. The distribution of these 22 schools by school type is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of Schools by School Type

School Types	Number	Remarks
Aided-mixed	4	3 SAP*, 1 of which offers Gifted programme All have long history; year of establishment ranges from 1906 to 1933
Government-mixed	4	Have long history; year of establishment ranges from 1906 to 1920s
	1	Established in 1950s, offers Gifted programme (mega school)
	1	Established in 1970s,
	5	Established in 1980s
	6	Established in 1990s
	1	Established in 2000s

*SAP: special assistance schools; offering both English and Chinese Language at first language level.

SCHOOL CULTURE AND ETHOS

The culture of the schools evolved from the school type and the years of establishment impacts the running of the school organization resulting in differing school’s focus or niche areas. In the four aided-mixed schools, much emphasis was placed on the proper induction of the pre-service teachers. This was done by the middle management; mainly the SCM and heads of department (HODs). Both the principals and vice-principals were present to extend a warm welcome to them. The pre-service teachers were introduced to the whole staff during assembly.

Induction materials including their observation and teaching timetables were given and the HODs or the SCMs explained the schools' visions and administration matter. The focus of the school was clearly communicated to the pre-service teachers. Two of the schools emphasize class management and discipline while the other two more renowned SAP schools stress on multi-intelligence and moral values such as courtesy, honour, justice, honesty and commitment which incidentally are part of the school motto. The pre-service teachers were brought to tour the school facilities.

In the other four schools with a long history; their year of establishment ranges from 1906 to 1920s, the schools are strong in Chinese culture; they still practise the 'bow' when greeting teachers or visitors. After the induction by senior teachers (ST) and SCM, the vice principals take time to chat with the pre-service teachers. Two of the schools even have a structured debrief with the pre-service teachers. Their opinions and perception were sought on the quality of their induction programmes and how could the running of the schools be further improved. This was followed by a short discussion of their one-week experience and the submission of a short reflection essay.

In these established schools, contact time is normally a two-way interaction. There is evidence of a big family with strong bonding, such as the celebration of staff birthdays and the recognition of exemplary conduct. The principal gave the parents' commendation letters to the teachers. The general atmosphere is warm and friendly, no politics and a culture of sharing pervades at every level.

Contrary to the above, the other mega school which offers gifted programme has its contact time in the lecture theatre. As a result, a barrier indirectly surfaces and communication tends to be only one way. (Alas! The mother-tongue teachers spent the contact time marking pupils' assignments). The school is rather noisy as there a need to have three recesses so that the canteen could accommodate

the pupils. Surprisingly, the pupils were very attentive during lessons despite the relatively high noise level.

However, what impressed the pre-service teacher was the fact that the principal personally took over the induction when the staff in charge was held back by some school matters. She was proud of her school niche area in *Information Technology* (IT) that she demonstrated to all the pre-service teachers the school internet links on her own personal computer. Somehow, these pre-service teachers felt a great sense of belonging from day one and being accepted as part of this big family.

The facilities are well-equipped and utilized by both teachers and pupils.

In one less established school B, the pre-service teacher was a little disappointed as she had to explore the school facilities on her own. The brief induction was done by the Learning Support Programme (LSP) teacher.

Schools established in the 1990s and 2000s, adopt a more pastoral and entrepreneurial approach. Beside the usual induction materials on school matters and expectations; there are regular issues of schools' newsletters. After introducing the pre-service teachers to the whole staff, the principal gave a bar of chocolate to each pre-service teacher. In the pre-service teacher's words "*the principal is 'motherly', she gives the school a homely feel; she welcomes the pre-service teachers with a bar of chocolate each during contact time which is indeed a pleasant surprise and memorable gesture!*".

All schools have IT facilities since Singapore's Masterplan Two (mp2) is already in full swing and most schools adhere to the guidelines set by MOE; IT-based lessons are incorporated in 30% of the subject curriculum time.

COOPERATING AND EXPERIENCED TEACHERS' PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

In the schools with the gifted programme; gifted pupils do not use text books; greater collaboration among teachers is evident as there is a need to devise their curriculum materials – worksheets. In a P4 gifted English lesson, pre-service teacher A commented that *“Initially she thought that teacher pitched it too high a level for pupils as the content resembled what she learnt at ‘A’ level.”* She later wrote: *“To my amazement, pupils could give very insightful comments”*

School A, a SAP school with a gifted programme has many interesting practices:

- silent reading for 15 minutes daily;
- daily eye relaxation exercise after recess which is done in the foyer with soft soothing music being played in the background;
- relate learning to recent events or real-life situations;
- use group work very often;
- encourage peer tutoring and pupils to provide alternative solutions even at P3 levels;
- promote the use of mathematical communication at P5;
- provide ample opportunities in fostering higher order thinking skills; the CT even gave her lesson plan to the pre-service teachers; and
- at P6 level (national examination year for primary schools); however, non-examination subjects take a back seat.

In school B, both desirable and not so desirable pedagogical practices were witnessed.

- Level head could not control class; noise level is high; pupils were restless;

- Very little incorporation of national education (NE) in lessons because of time constraints;
- P5 science on *force* was carried out at basketball court with instructions given in class; surprisingly the pupils' behaviour and attitude are both positive;
- Clapping of hands by teacher to get pupils' attention;
- For brainstorming; teacher expects pupils to jot down their ideas in draft to prevent them from off task; and
- LSP teacher in the course of her teaching exhibits great patience and tolerance; the pre-service teacher was inspired by the *extra mile* she gave to the pupils.

FOLLOW-UP OF LOGS AND JOURNALS SUBMISSION

The pre-service teachers shared their products online and discussion was encouraged among their peers. This process of viewing their peer daily logs as well as the reflection journals and the gathering of different viewpoints and perspectives on what they see and experience through discussion is essential. The interactive process enables the pre-service teachers to process what they have seen individually in their own school context and as a collective cluster; where different school cultures play a role too. The pre-service teachers could then establish some forms of commonalities and differences being practised across all primary schools in the nation as a whole.

This initial acquisition of a repertoire of pedagogical practices provides the pre-service teachers with a wide spread of buffet which they could make reference to in their eight-week of practicum some four months later. More excerpts of the pre-service teachers' daily logs and reflection journals (see Appendix D).

CONCLUDING REMARK

The cognitive contents of their daily logs and reflection journals have provided us with some interesting insights into the schools' culture and ethos and the current pedagogical practices. This school experience stint is a unique opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn from "current experts" within the complex dynamics of the classrooms. They still have time to fully process what is being observed and seek clarifications and guidance from these practitioners; CTs and SCM. In addition to this, on their return to NIE, the sharing and discussion with their peers and tutors will further help them in their goal setting and charting their own professional development for their practicum.

Research has not conclusively shown that there is a personality type that makes a good teacher. Good teachers are neither born, nor made but '*they make themselves.*' (Petty, 2004). One can teach more effectively if one knows how to learn from one very own mistakes and successes; that is, to reinforce on the strengths and constantly seek to improve on areas of concern.

Schon has aptly mentioned "Learning and teaching is not simple, you will never arrive at a final decision about the nature of learning and teaching BUT will continue to develop your understanding throughout your career." (Schon, 1983). Thus the starting point of the pre-service teachers' professional development or growth could begin with high quality reflection and insights gained from the constant intellectual sparring with current practitioners and the application of Schon's 'theory-in-use model.'

The critical content of any learning experience is the *method* or *process* through which the learning occurs (Dewey, 1963). With the current changes in the Singapore education scene, 'Teach Less, Learn More' (TLLM), the *current classroom practice* should move from a strictly "*teacher-centric*" towards more "*student-centric*". This will

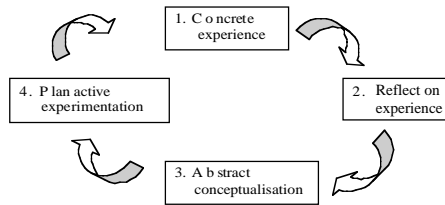
help to create a thinking culture and nurture lifelong learners. Hence, the idea that content (*concepts and skills*) is everything will not hold. Content (*concepts and skills*) and method (*processes and metacognition*) should go hand in hand and not as separate entities.

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APPENDIX A

A checklist for reflective practitioner¹



The experiential or reflective learning cycle

S/N	Reflective Statement	Tick <input type="checkbox"/>
1.	Do I always spend some time to reflect on my lessons?	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	After each lesson, do I consider what went right and that less well?	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Do I try to establish sound learning points that I can apply in future teaching?	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Do I avoid too much blaming on my students if things do not go well?	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Do I seek opportunities to talk about my teaching with my CTs or SCM who might offer me some help?	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Do I make a conscious effort to use the experiential learning cycle to help me improve my teaching?	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	Have I taken any concrete steps to improve my effectiveness in whichever phase of the experiential learning cycle I find most difficult?	<input type="checkbox"/>

In the scenario of a mathematics lesson:

- a) How do I help my pupils solve a Mathematics problem?
- b) What is it that I need to know about my pupils to help them solve a Mathematics problem?
- c) Am I able to identify the disabling factors and remove them?
- d) Have I identified the enabling factors and ensure their presence to facilitate my pupils in their learning?

1 Adapted from Petty, G. (2004). *A Practical Guide: Teaching Today*. (3rd Ed.), UK: Nelson Thomes (Publishers) Ltd.

APPENDIX B

Daily Log of School Experience: 13th - 18th September 2004

Name of pre-service teacher: _____ Reg. No. ()

School attached to: _____

School Type: *Govt/Aided**: _____

School established (Year): _____ Gifted Program: *Yes/No**

Subjects trained to teach: _____

Day	Date	Particulars of Events	Reflective Remarks
Mon	Sep 13 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Induction: given by P/VP/SCM/HOD. • Observed CT in English Lessons • Assisted in CCA e.g. Choir practice • Did relief for in EM3 class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline is the school's focus.....what was transpired • Managing group work is not easy...why? How will you do it? What have you learnt? • Gain greater insights in conducting the CCA... how was it done? Any external instructor, etc. duration • Surprisingly, the class was fairly well-behaved – reasons being

Tue Sep 14th _____

Wed Sep 15th _____

Thurs Sep 16th _____

Fri Sep 17th _____

Sat Sep 18th _____

*Delete what is not applicable!

APPENDIX C

Reflection Journal for Mathematics Sep 13th to 18th 2004

Thinking Schools Learning Nation (TSLN) is our Ministry of Education's vision (MOE, 1997) => A perpetual-learning teacher.

Reflective practice is part and parcel of social and professional growth of an effective teacher.

- Keep a record of all your lesson observation or lessons taught by you.
- Write a reflection about your Mathematics learning and teaching

Date: _____ Class: _____ Observed/Taught: _____

Mathematics Topic: _____ Duration: _____
Venue: _____

-
- Memorable/significant episode/s {capture critical leaning moments on sticky pad; Salleh, (2004)}

Significant Learning Points:

-
- I am happy that I
-
- I am disappointed with

If I were to teach this topic, I will remember to

In my opinion, to teach this Mathematics topic, I need to

*Delete what is not applicable!

APPENDIX D

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER A:

Reflection Journal for Mathematics Sep 13th to 18th 2004

Date: 15 Sep 04	Class: P302 (2 nd best class)	Observed:
Mathematics Topic:	Duration: 1 hour (2 periods)	
Time - Conversion of minutes to seconds, and seconds to minutes	Venue: Classroom	

Memorable/significant episode/s:

- Throughout the PowerPoint presentation, the classroom was breezy and as a result the white screen kept moving in "waves". It was rather distracting.
- Teacher asked pupils to keep all textbooks away and use only a notebook or rough paper to work out sums. It makes learning *less intimidating* and *provides a change of routine*.

I am happy with:

- the teacher demonstrating together with pupils *on how to approximate timing without using a watch/stopwatch*, by counting 1000, 2000, 3000.....etc.....10000, 1000, 2000, 3000....etc....10000.....and so on. This is a useful and practical strategy.

I am disturbed by or disappointed with:

- the teacher using her watch on the *visualizer to demonstrate the second-hand without checking before the lesson, that the dark-coloured watch face would show up clearly. (It did not)*. None of the pupils had a suitable watch to use on the visualizer. Pre-service teacher teacher ended up offering her watch with *light-coloured face* which showed up well and clear on the visualizer (and saved the day!)

If I were to teach this class/topic (again), I will remember *to check resources and materials prior to the lesson to ensure they will function fine and well*.

In my opinion, to teach this Mathematics topic, I need to remind pupils that the short form for "seconds" is written in the lower-case ("s") not ("sec") *as is wrongly used very often by mass media*, and also that it should be clearly written to avoid mistaking it for the number "5".

*Delete what is not applicable!

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER B:

**Daily Log of School Experience
13th - 18th September 2004**

Day 5	Time	Particulars of Events	Reflective/ Explanatory Remarks
Friday Sep 17 ^t	1100-1230	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bought cards and gifts 	I met up with PX at Tampines Mall to shop for thank you cards and small mementos to express our appreciation. We really are thankful for the guidance, support and the learning experience in AA Primary School.
	1300-1330	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lesson Observation Mrs G- Primary 5/4 Maths lesson- Graphs 	(Refer to Appendix I for details)*
	1330-1430	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lesson Observation Mdm R - Primary 3/8 Maths lesson- Time 	We were told that P 3/8 was the best Primary 3 class of the level and indeed it was! (Refer to Appendix J for details)*
	1500-1600	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read an interesting book 	I took this time to read a book that Miss C lent to PX to read. It is <i>“How to be an effective teacher. The First days of School.”</i> By Harry K Wong and Rosemary T Wong. <i>In it are many helpful tips; ranging from topics such as classroom management and how to dress appropriately and how to lay classroom</i>

rules. I learnt quite a few techniques from the book.

A chapter especially intrigued me where a teacher shares how the class begged her to test them. I agree with a lot of points raised by the authors, especially two points.

- 1) Teachers who are inducted properly into the school (with the support of staff) will stay in the teaching profession for a longer time.
- 2) Having a plan before entering the classroom and knowing your objectives is the key to a successful lesson.

I have also learnt from the book that a teacher has not taught unless the students learnt something. I would highly recommend this book to new teachers.

1600-1800 • Relief a class –P 5/8

- Miss C is ill and she has taken leave. They need a relief teacher to sit in the class and PX has to do it . *She was traumatized by the class when she taught in the class earlier on*

before recess and she asked me to sit in with her to relief the class. I agreed.

*Not included in this paper.

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|--|--|
| <p>Friday
Sep 17th</p> | <p>1600-1800</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relief a class - P 5/8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since PX warned me that P5/8 is a noisy class without Miss C. I stepped into class and <i>laid down 2 rules with the class.</i> • <i>They are not allowed to talk and not allowed to leave their seats. If they need to do, they must seek permission. Those who violate the rules will have their names submitted to Miss C.</i>
It worked because they were pretty afraid of Miss C. • <i>Miss C has set work for the class from 4pm till 5:30pm. So the class did the work quietly for the one and half hours.</i> • AT 5:30pm, I decided to play a game with a class since they were well behaved. I played the game mystery number with them and it was a hilarious time. I really enjoyed the session |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|--|--|

		with them even though I do not think they learnt anything much from the game. It was for me, a good way to end my school experience at JAA Primary School.
1800-1830	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gave the cards and gifts to teachers and principal	We took time to give the thank you cards and gifts to the teachers who helped us and thanked them for giving us a fruitful time at AA J Primary School.
