

PROBLEM TEACHERS

1. GEORGE MATTHEWS

I first heard of George Matthews when I was principal of Gagg Secondary School in Barbados. A senior member of the staff had been promoted and I was discussing the filling of the vacancy which had resulted with an officer of the Ministry of Education.

"Would you accept George Matthews to fill the vacancy?" the supervisor asked.

"Who is George Matthews?" I queried, "I have never heard of him."

"He has been the acting deputy principal of Turner Secondary for the past two years. That post has now been filled, and we think it best to move Mr Matthews from that school - provided that we can find a principal who would take him."

I had no need of a deputy, so I reminded him that I already had one.

"As you know Gagg already has a deputy. What is Mr Matthews' substantive post?"

"He is not even a senior teacher in status."

"Then, what administrative post will he be able to hold in my school?"

"I cannot think of any."

"But why?" I asked, "You cannot downgrade a former acting deputy principal like that. In the first place, I think it is not good for Mr Matthews himself, and secondly, it is not good for the morale of the service. How long has he been teaching?"

"Over twenty years."

"Why are you asking me to take him?"

"As a matter of fact, the Ministry considers him to be quite incompetent as an administrator, and would welcome the opportunity if he could be got out of the profession as quickly as possible.

"I will discuss the matter with my deputy principal. If he agrees with me, we will have Mr Matthews on our staff."

Later, in discussion with the deputy principal, it was brought to my attention that Mr Matthews had been considered a trouble maker on the staffs of the schools at which he had worked. He was however highly qualified, both academically and professionally.

We took the decision to have Mr Matthews on the staff. The supervisor was notified accordingly.

Mr Matthews arrived at Gagg during the first week of the 1977 to 1978 academic year. He was forty-three years old, and grey at the temples. He seemed to be dispirited, and moved about rather lazily. He was given the responsibility to teach Geography in ten forms.

During the first four weeks, I tried to monitor his progress. I would pass his classes occasionally to see whether he was actually teaching. I would send for him and ask if he was having any problems. He would always assure me that there were very few.

At the beginning of the sixth week, I asked him to assume responsibility for the teachers and pupils of the fourth forms. He accepted this assignment without a murmur.

It was soon brought to my attention that the teachers of the fourth years found his advice very helpful and that he offered encouragement to all of them. Students in this age group had been saying too that he was a very good teacher.

Gradually his personality improved. He became jovial and moved around with enthusiasm, and seemingly with much more purpose.

I wondered what were the reasons for Mr Matthews removal from the deputy principalship of Turner Secondary. I began to suspect that he had offended someone in authority, or even that he was possibly of lower social class origin - which was considered a disadvantage for a supervisory position.

I remembered being advised by a former principal of mine. "Make sure that you do not say anything to upset your supervisory officers, because they will use their intelligence to prevent your progress in the profession."

I recalled too being told after an interview by a senior officer: "You had better open your eyes. In order to progress in this society, people in power have got to be acquainted with your parents. Who was your father?"

However, at the end of the school year, the deputy, the staff, and I realised that Mr Matthews had been a great credit to the school.

The supervisor visited the school during the third term and enquired about the performance of Matthews. I told him that Matthews was doing a fine job. He was very disappointed and said "You do not know Mr Matthews."

Discussion

1. Account for Mr Matthews' behaviour after being at Gagg for only one term.
2. What do you consider were the motives behind the principal's decision to have Mr Matthews on his staff?
3. What reasons can you advise for the supervisor's disappointment when he was told that Mr Matthews was performing very well at Gagg?
4. Can you suggest any reasons why low social origin may be considered a disadvantage for a supervisory position?

2. A CASE FOR TRANSFER?

Discussion

Read the following case study carefully; identify the various places at which the issue might have been resolved, indicate a number of strategies which the administration might have used and then outline a final solution.

Gary White had completed three years of a four-year degree course in English, History and Sociology, but refused to return for the final year since he strongly believed that the U.W.I. was placing too much emphasis on passing examinations, and doing too little to develop character or change values. He applied to the Ministry for a teaching position and was interviewed by Mike Rowan who was then Senior Education Officer in charge of recruiting of staff.

Mr Rowan, after a long interview, finally decided to send Gary to Boyd School which was an all-age school. Boyd School had 14 staff members and an enrolment of 344 boys. There were 10 female teachers and four males. Gary was sent there because Gerry Moore the Headmaster, had a reputation for handling tough cases and keeping teachers in line. Gary, on the other hand, was well-known for his unorthodox views and for having led a 'sit-in' of students during his third year.

He lost no time in getting to know the students. He was assigned a class of eight and nine-year olds, but seemed especially friendly with those twelve years and older. During this year, most of the staff felt that Gary was doing little 'teaching' and was spending most of his time telling or reading stories to his students. They frowned on this but did nothing, as they all liked Gary and believed that he would 'come on' with time, especially since he had such a good relationship with the students. He had even started a debating club for the senior students, and had taken charge of the sports programme.

At the end of the year, Gerry and a number of the older teachers talked about Gary's year, and what they thought should be done. They even discussed a rumour that Gary was using the debating club to introduce students to Rastafarianism and other such ideas. Gerry promised to talk to Gary at the beginning of the new term. Six weeks into the new term, however, Mrs Payne who taught the ten and eleven-year olds, began to complain that the students were very badly prepared, fell far short of what she expected and could not do simple things that students in other years handled without difficulty. She was concerned that the group would not be able to meet the standards for the eleven-plus examination, and vehemently stated that it was Gary's approach which was responsible for the poor showing, and that Gerry had better do something. Gerry simply said that he felt that Gary was improving, and that he was thinking of shifting him to the twelve-year olds in the following year. He therefore asked Mrs Payne to have patience.

Matters continued in much the same manner until in April a parent came to see Mr Moore to complain that Mr White was filling her son's head with 'foolishness', instead of teaching him how to read and write properly. At this point, Mr Moore told the parent that he would look after it. When she left, he wrote a report to Mr Rowan at the Ministry requesting that Gary be transferred to another school.

Two days later Mr Rowan telephoned Gary, gave him the gist of Mr Moore's letter, and requested Gary to see him on the following Friday. Gary then indicated to Mr Moore that he would be referring the matter to his union which would see to it that he remained at Boyd School.

3. A VERY PRIVATE MATTER

"If you don't get him removed from your school soon, we shall have to lodge an official complaint with the Ministry," Dr Yap said quietly before he left the principal's office. Jacob Tan felt the school's Advisory Committee Chairman had justification in issuing his threat. He should have acted long before this. How does one ignore a scandal involving a male teacher and a sixteen year old girl pupil? And yet it was not really his business to interfere in what was really a very private matter. The girl had reached the 'age of consent'. He had hoped things might have worked out well for them.

Richard Ho (26) had taught English and badminton competently for the past four years he had been at the Lion City Secondary School. He was perhaps too egotistical to be popular with the other members of the staff. Still he was enthusiastic and diligent and had shown initiative. The pupils had responded well to him. A pity he had to go overboard for Susan Wong, the fair prefect, in Secondary 3 Arts. In fact he had gone out of his way to offer to take her class in English and General Studies. The senior assistant had not realised his motive until too late. Richard had kept Susan back for additional coaching in English, had encouraged her to take up badminton, found occasions to take her home personally. Susan who must have felt flattered at first, fell in love and subsequently gave herself to her tutor. They had gone on trips to Johore and stayed weekends together.

Now the male teachers had protested that the affair was the talk of the school and had put them in a bad light. Other girls had sniggered and cracked jokes about teacher Casanovas. The senior assistant had wanted him to reprimand Ho.

Susan's mother had seen him the week before. She herself was unable to communicate with her daughter. The father was usually abroad on business. Mrs Wong had not cared much about Susan's activities until her open defiance in staying away on weekends. She felt angry and ashamed - angry that the teacher could have taken advantage and ashamed that she had not taken better care of her daughter.

Finally it had to come to this. Other parents had heard of the affair. They had discussed among themselves and felt moral indignation. Dr Yap was merely acting as their proxy.

The principal sighed. He felt uneasy. A pity. Would taking action against the teacher help matters. He doubted. He greatly doubted.

4. A FUSS ABOUT SAVINGS STAMPS

For many years Miss Khee had been a teacher of Chantip school and recently she had been appointed its principal. An unassuming person she had the quiet ability to get the best out of everyone especially in situations most people would find difficult to handle.

Chantip was a primary school with 1000 pupils and situated a few hundred yards away from the residence of Miss Khee. The pupils came from three different language streams although the majority were from the English stream, and the Chinese and Malay streams constituted only a minority population. These pupils were taught and cared for by 40 teachers who, like the pupils, also came from different social, cultural and language backgrounds.

The expectations of parents, staff conflict, settling in the inexperienced and newly appointed teachers, and the welfare of poor pupils - these were and had been the perennial problems with which Miss Khee had found herself confronted.

Walking along her usual path to the school she pondered over the many problems that beset her - the most vivid of which was the recent incident between two of her teachers, Mr Salut and Mr Chin. Mr Salut being assigned by the principal the function of selling savings stamps had been prevented by Mr Chin from carrying out this function during a class lesson conducted by the latter. While Mr Salut maintained that Mr Chin intentionally prevented him from discharging his duties, Mr Chin insisted that it was Mr Salut who deliberately interrupted his class lesson.

Miss Khee was fully aware of Mr Salut's aggressive nature but she had no doubt of his loyalty - besides, he had been extremely hardworking since the day he joined the school and had, in fact become quite indispensable to the school. Miss X was also aware of Mr Chin as an excellent classroom teacher as well as his dedication towards his teaching. Although he was not prepared to take on any extra curricular activities and he could not get along well with most of his colleagues.

Miss Khee's unofficial investigation had revealed that, prior to this incident, Mr Chin and Mr Salut had a dispute over the delegation of duties during the school sports day. Since then, they had displayed hostility towards each other.

An attempt to resolve this problem by the appointment of another teacher, (who was on friendly terms with Mr Chin) to look after the sales of stamps had proved to be abortive.

Miss Khee did not wish to comment unfavourably on Mr Chin as she was aware that he was an excellent teacher in spite of all his weaknesses. Neither, had she the desire to condemn Mr Salut.

Discussion

How did Miss Khee solve her problem?

5. DEEDS - NOT WORDS

Joe Blow is an appointed enthusiastic primary teacher. He is the resource person and was appointed to this 'post' by his headteacher. He has successfully completed a two years' training programme and has been teaching for over five years.

Joe Blow is always complaining about science equipment. Suffice it to say that basic equipment had been at the school for some time but is under-utilised.

Joe Blow is always remarking about children's problems related to science but when questioned as to whether he is acquainted with the new science syllabus and guides, he is very quick to answer in the affirmative. A check by the headteacher demonstrates that the guides have been locked away in the cupboard from the time of their arrival and untouched. The said guides could very well be implemented with little or none of the basic equipment for they are based on local, indigenous materials.

Although Joe Blow discusses modern approaches to science very aptly, there is no record of these approaches in any of his plans of work. He usually cites very tangible and worthwhile techniques during any discussions pertaining to the improvement of science in the classroom, but useful ideas never seem to filter down to the children in the classroom. His headteacher believes that he talks a lot and falls short of actually putting what he says into practice. A careful check demonstrates that his lessons are of the lecture type. He claims that the children are backward and hardly grasp what is taught to them. When suggestions are made about the improvement of science in general his declaration is, "I have tried them all."

Joe Blow has been receiving further training in the improvement of classroom techniques and how children learn science. In the same training programme the new guides are tackled and experiments are tried out along with simulated exercises concerned with professional development. When plans are made concerning the new guides Joe Blow frequently absents himself from the sessions.

Discussion

1. Why should Joe act in this way?
2. How should the principal tackle this problem?

6. THE COLD FISH

Mr Ram Reddy a 24 year-old teacher was an English teacher in a private secondary school of Port Louis. He was of medium height, well-read and took his work rather seriously. He was in his class earlier than any other teacher in the morning planning and organising his work for the day.

He was stand-offish as a teacher and did not believe in the value of informal contacts. "Familiarity", he said, "breeds contempt." He never tried to approach students as individuals, and was simply an impersonal authority figure or 'player of the teacher role'. "Teachers", he said, "spend too much time nowadays trying to establish credibility with students I am here to teach, that's all."

For three consecutive years his class had divided feelings about him. A few found him excellent, they even stayed behind to do the boards, and to help him carry his bag to his car. A sizeable minority found him distant, unbearable and as a result were openly defiant. "He should have been an army captain," exclaimed one of them. "Whenever I ask him a question, he reacts with blame and frustration or disgust." On the other hand the bulk of the class went along with the day to day routine without grumbling too much.

Occasionally parents complained to the principal who then had a few words with the teacher. One day while Mr Ram Reddy was busy writing on the board, he heard a cat-call. He thought he recognised the voice, and he shouted vehemently, "Out of my class, Akim, out!" Akim laughed, looked at his friends, and spoke out with a calculated coolness. "Get me out Sir... that is if you can."

Akim, who was only fourteen, was a tall boy, taller than the teacher. The noise subsided, there was a heavy silence in the air, the silence that preludes a storm.

Mr Ram Reddy was shocked and confused - he slammed the door and rushed out to the principal's office.

7. FUNDS AND DECISIONS

People in the Case

Miss White Principal, Motatin School

Mrs Lau Head Tutor

Mrs Moa Staff member

Motatin school has borrowed \$100,000 from the bank for a new dormitory block and construction has already started. To repay the loan a fund-raising project has been launched. The target for the first year of the project has been set at \$10,000.

Miss White, the principal, delegated responsibility for organising fund-raising through individual classes to the head tutor, Mrs Lau. Mrs Lau left the decision on the means of raising funds to form teachers and classes. Decisions from each class on methods to be used were passed to the head tutor. Mrs Lau was not satisfied with some of the decisions taken and kept those classes back in the assembly hall after morning devotions. She grumbled at everybody and showed her dissatisfaction with the decisions reached. Finally she informed the classes that they had to hold a concert to which all parents should come and donate at least \$5.00. The classes thought this was too much. They had decided that each class member would donate \$2.00 towards the fund.

Mrs Moa, one of the form teachers, was unhappy with the head tutor's action in forcing the students to hold a concert. She went and talked with the principal. Miss White said that whatever the classes had decided to do should be done. She also said that the head tutor's directive should be ignored.

Unfortunately Mrs Lau was a most influential person and would certainly do what she had decided. Mrs Moa, on the other hand, was determined to do what she and her class had decided.

8. JEALOUSY

Narovi School is a day and boarding school situated in an isolated rural area.

There are seventeen members of staff at the school - ten males and seven females. Out of these, four members are married and their wives are also teaching in the same school. Six other married couples are living in the school compound with their wives and children and are occupying school quarters provided by the school committee.

Mr and Mrs Daniel who are both teachers are occupying one of the houses. He often has trouble with his neighbours because of his wife. He is a very suspicious person and makes trouble over very minor matters. He suspects that his wife is dishonest and often accuses her of spying on their neighbours. At times he gets so bad-tempered that he beats and assaults his wife.

In the school during normal teaching hours he keeps an eye on his wife, and will not allow her to mix socially with other members of staff, especially the males. He often has petty differences, arguments and troubles with other staff members. He pollutes the minds of other members too by carrying tales. Moreover, he speaks ill of others and casts slurs on their character.

The situation is one that calls for resolute action from the headmaster.

Discussion

What should the headmaster do to maintain good staff relationships and to develop professional responsibility in the teachers?

9. A QUESTIONABLE REPORT

The District Education Officer was asked to report on the progress of a first-year teacher. Upon arrival at the school he discussed the progress of the teacher with the headteacher who described the teacher's work as poor, stating that he was lazy, that his lessons were not adequately prepared and that he made very little effort to teach his class at all. The District Education Officer then visited the teacher's classroom and in view of the headteacher's report he was pleasantly surprised to see two excellent lessons taught by the teacher. He was further surprised to find the teacher's schemes of work and lesson records well prepared and up to date.

Discussion

1. What reasons could there be for the difference between the work of the teacher observed by the DEO and work reported by the headteacher?
2. In what ways could the DEO check whether the lessons he saw were the result of a special effort by the teacher in anticipation of his visit?
3. If you were the District Education Officer and you were satisfied that the headteacher's report on the teacher was unfair and untrue what action would you take?

10. THE DISCIPLINE MASTER

Mr Syed, the new principal of the high school, was seated in his office waiting for Mr Lim to keep his appointment. As he waited, the principal recalled the problems he had encountered with Mr Lim, the school's discipline master, and pondered about how he should deal with the situation.

At first, Mr Syed recalled, he had been pleased to allow Mr Lim, an experienced teacher, to organise the school discipline, but later a number of incidents gave him cause to be concerned. Although students were not allowed to leave the school premises during school hours - 7.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., without permission of the principal, Mr Syed had met a student leaving the school. On investigating, the principal found that Mr Lim had sent the student to the Union's office on an errand concerning Union affairs. When Mr Syed discussed the incident with Mr Lim he was assured that there would be no recurrence of the breach of regulations.

In another instance students complained that Mr Lim consistently came late to classes and at other times never came at all. Teachers too complained that Mr Lim's class was extremely noisy when they were teaching next door. The principal's investigation resulted in him teaching the class in Mr Lim's absence. The discussion with Mr Lim concerning his unsatisfactory behaviour produced the desired outcome and Mr Lim had been on time to all his classes since.

A few days ago Mr Lim had requested permission to go home during school hours to care for his son who was ill and home alone. However, the principal now knew that instead of going home Mr Lim went to have his car serviced at a garage and had not spent the remainder of his time at his home. And, yesterday, a form five student, Ahmad had complained that Mr Lim had slapped him because his hair was longer than the specified length. Mr Lim, an experienced discipline master, should have known that the regulations did not permit him to slap a student. Today, Ahmad's father had complained about the slapping of his son, whose conduct over the years had always been reported as good.

A knock on the door signalled the principal that Mr Lim had arrived and he drew a deep breath before calling "Please come in!"

Discussion

As Mr Syed, the principal, what would you do?

11. A STUBBORN STAFF MEMBER

Matthew Mensa, headteacher of Corinda School believed in making a good start to the school year. Returning from vacation a few days early he prepared detailed organisation plans in readiness for the first staff meeting of the year. In particular he gave much thought to the allocation of teachers to classes. Some of the staff members were well known to Matthew but there were six newcomers about whom the Ministry had furnished only the sketchiest of information.

To Matthew's surprise his announcement of the new class - teacher allocations caused much dissension. Some staff members even made disparaging and hostile comments and it became evident to Matthew that he needed to tread carefully. Using all his personal charm and persuasion he interviewed his staff members individually and at length the situation settled down reasonably well - except for Samson Nipa.

Samson, who had been allocated a junior class stoutly maintained that, as he had been trained to teach seniors he had no intention of working at another level. Since, in its infinite wisdom, the Ministry had sent more teachers trained to teach upper levels than were needed there was little Matthew could do to change Samson's assignment - nor, in view of the teacher's attitude was Matthew prepared to try very hard to do so. As a result very little teaching was done in Samson's junior class and parents began to complain.

Discussion

Who should resolve this problem? What should be done?

12. THE PRINCIPAL IS PUZZLED

I have just taken charge of a school. Amongst the members of the staff are two teachers, X and Y, both of the same race.

X, aged about 50, has been at the school for ten years, and spends every minute he can at his work. He 'knows' exactly how the school should be run, right down to the last detail, and airs his knowledge vehemently, formally in staff meetings and informally also.

Y, aged about 25 has been in the school for one year, and spends every minute he can at his recreation. He 'discerns' the way the school should be run, but feels that his ideas won't be accepted because 'anybody under 30 knows nothing'. He disagrees with X in the vehemence of his propaganda, both in staff meetings and at large.

The disharmony created can readily be envisaged. I have reasoned with each of them, privately and confidentially endeavouring to get each to see things the way the other sees them, and to see them the way a 'reasonable' man would see them. Each remains satisfied that he is correct and continues on his headlong course. What next?

13. TOMAS

Memo: To Principal

From Deputy Principal

I have just finished a period of supervision with Tomas. I watched him teach for a while. The lesson was Mathematics with fifth grade and it was a disaster - I told him so.

When you asked me to take him over this year I knew that he wasn't a strong teacher. I've given a lot of time to him and I have offered many suggestions but he doesn't seem to have learned a thing. His preparation is still unsatisfactory, his methods are out of date and the children are noisy and disinterested.

He has been teaching for a long time now and, because he is cheerful and kindly, he is well liked by some of the other staff members.

I know that Tomas is still my problem but parents are beginning to complain. I would like to have your advice. What do I do next? How do I communicate with this man?