LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS WITH REFERENCE TO CREATIVE WRITING THROGH THE METHOD OF ACTION RESEARCH

by

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Introduction

Most of the teaching objectives in Malaysian schools are centred on preparing students to face their respective examinations when the time comes. Teachers are in jubilant mood if students show remarkable achievement in these examinations. Their notion of success in teaching is when students under their charge score high marks in the subjects they teach. If quality education is anything we desire, then the teaching objectives need to be extended to include the teaching and learning activities that go beyond mere passing of the examinations and inculcate into them the need to be creative and cooperative. This limitation in the teaching objectives need to be addressed and redress in order to exploit the students' potentials to the fullest.

It has been observed that the teaching methods and literacy practices in our school system today are geared towards sharpening certain skills that obviously are lacking in coherence. Each skill is considered as a seperate entity devoid of its relation with others. When a unit in the curriculum is taught, very often there is no attempt to link or integrate interrelated skills. A teacher in one discipline is unlikely to know what his or her colleages are doing in any other discipline. However, in the Phylosophy of Education in Malaysia, a teacher is expected to be able to integrate interrelated skills for the purpose of promoting total development of a child.

Generally, the curriculum itself is viewed in a very narrow perspective because the subject matter as well as the structures are predetermined. The stereo-type answers of the students reflect the inadequacies of such teaching methods to motivate creativity and promote cooperation among students. This does not help in paving the way for the enhancement of a positive behavior in learning.

Background

The issue that prompted this study on literacy lingers around the question that has often been asked whether or not we are in the right path towards achieving the Philosophy of Education that has been set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Our Phylosophy of Education states that:

"Education in Malaysia is an on going effort towards to further develop the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionlly and physically balanced and harmonious ....(Education in Malaysia 1989:5).

The goal of our education system is to produce citizens with well-balanced development in personality from the four main aspects namely, Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Intellectual (PESI). Our main focus in the project is the development of cognitive as well as intellectual abilities in children which is the key to the development of all other aspects. To develop intellectually, one must possess a mind that is free from inhibitions, broad and imaginative. It must be inculcated through freedom of expression. The big question here therefore is whether our literacy practices in schools allow such freedom or are they just tools for mere passing of the examinations.

Definition of Literacy

In the sixties when Malaysia was struggling to find a footing in the development of the nation, a literate person is one who knows how to read and write. It would not be an exaggeration to say that today, the question of whether one is able to read or write no longer exists. Everyone has gone through at least a period of nine years of free education.

The definition of literacy is therefore perceived as an attempt by individuals to acquire knowledge in order to integrate the skills in reading and writing to those of listening, communicating and thinking. Hence it involves not only acquiring knowledge, but also the ability to apply them appropriately at different social circumstances.

The main focus of this literacy project is based on a wider concept of literacy as mooted by Wager (1987); Fraire and Macedo (1987); Nammuddu (1990) and Unsworth (1993). The definition of literacy here has been expanded to include the basic concept of living literacy: conceptual literacy; cultural literacy and functional literacy.

Conceptualization of The Literacy Project in Schools

Before arriving at the right model for our research project, the team went through an extensive literature search. This is necessary in order to develop a model which suits our Education System. Certain elements and approaches to the development of literacy in schools were identified (Kim 1992). These were later constructed into a model which we call as "The dimension of 5 Cs." These five elements are regarded to be the basis for any development of literacy in our school system. The elements of Cooperation, Communication, Civility, Creativity and Confidence are intertwine and interact with one another as shown in figure (1) below:

The Five Dimensions
**(5 Cs)**
Dimension 2

(Fig. 1)

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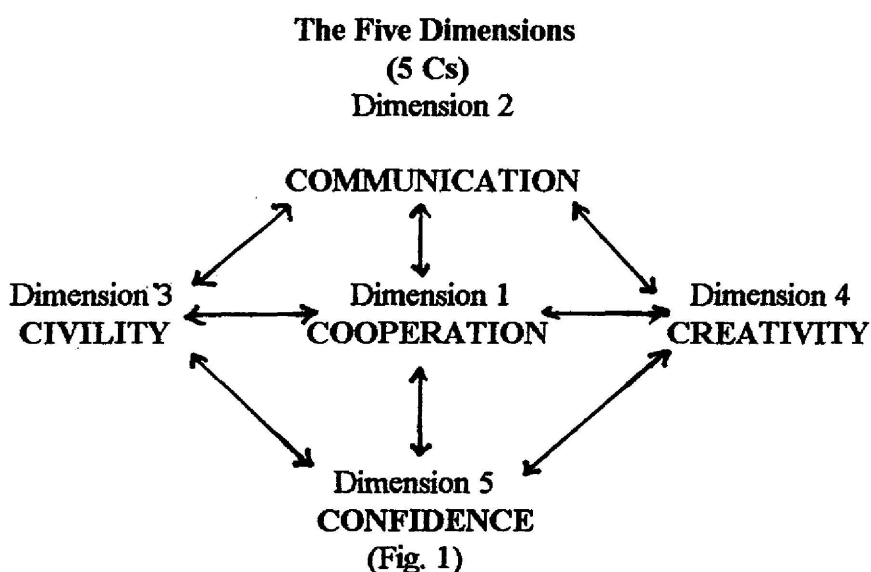
We envisage the above five dimensions to be the theoretical framework which require deeper and detail study of each. Dimension (1), Cooperation for instance, can be explored with various groups or parties having connections directly or indirectly which can help foster literacy among students. If we examine this dimension alone in its 'entirety, the parties involve include students, parents, school administrators, teachers and the researchers themselves. This dimension can be further illustrated by figure (2):

The Cooperation Network
(Dimension 1)

TEACHERS

PARENTS ⟷ STUDENTS ⟷ RESEARCHERS

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
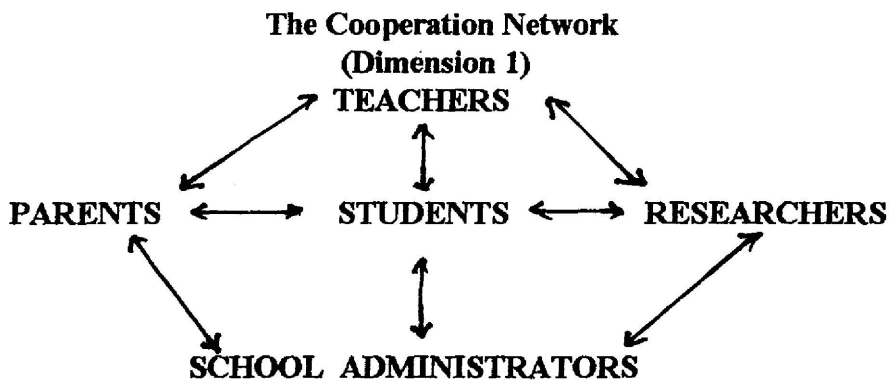
(Fig. 2)

Similarly, taking Dimension (2) of communication, we can envisage the aspects of living literacy among students. The main communication activities that have been encouraged under this project are the ones related to solidarity whether orally or in written form. Since Malaysia comprises of many ethnic groups, the theme of solidarity has always been an agenda in the school curiculum. Students are encourged to share their activities within the heterogeneous group to foster goodwill and the feeling of togetherness under the same roof and within the same society. Such activities include drawing, reading, discussing, writing and so on. Thus, this dimension of communication can be graphically illustrated as follows in figure (3):

The Communication Network
(Dimension 2)

DRAWING/INVENTING

ACTING ⟷ WRITING ⟷ READING
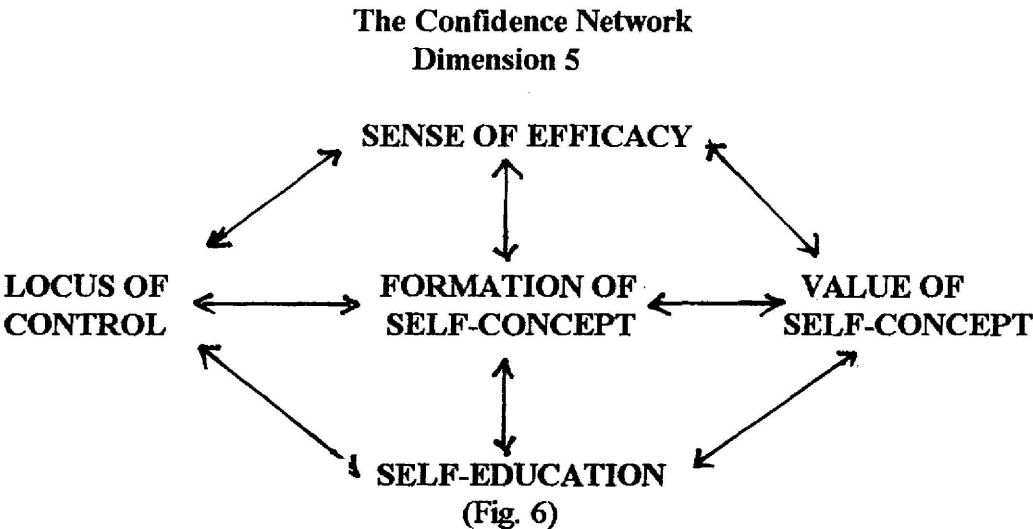
DISCUSSION/LECTURE
(Fig. 3)
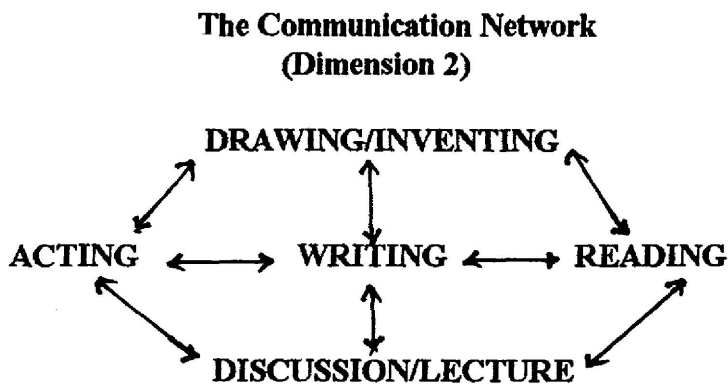
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The aspect of civic education or civility can be envisaged as fostering good habbits and the inculcation of the right values among students. These values include interest, ambition, attitude, moral and beliefs. Where beliefs are concerned, due to the multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religous nature of our society there is a diversity in beliefs, traditions and practices. Children are taught to respect the religion and culture of each ethnic origin and never to infringe upon the right of others to practice their own. This dimension can best be illustrated as shown in figure (4) below:

The Civility Network
(Dimension 3)

BELIEF

INTEREST ⟷ **MORAL** ⟷ **AMBITION**

ATTITUDE
(fig. 4)
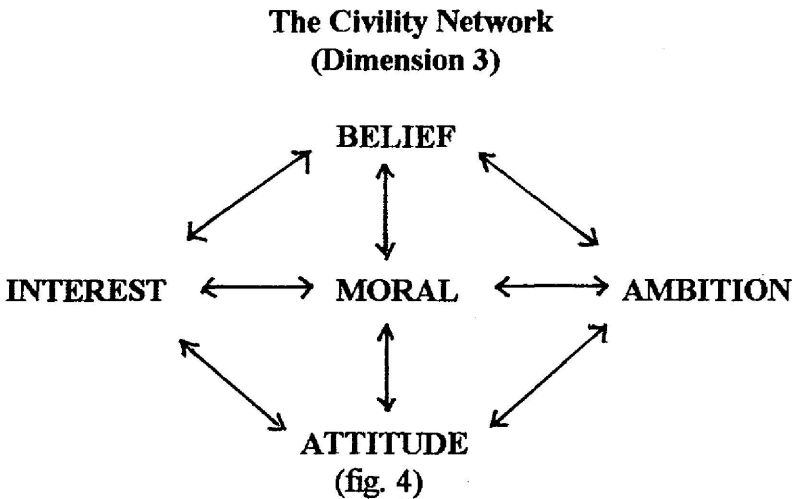
Creativity is not necessarily innate in nature. It can be taught and it is up to the teachers to provide the proper climate for its development. The creative dimension involves such things as opportunities, motivation, skills, knowledge and its achievement or manifestations can be seen in writing or other forms of the students work such as drawing and the like.

The Creativity Network
(Dimention 4)
OPPORTUNITIES

KNOWLEDGE ⟷ **ACHIEVEMENT** ⟷ **SKILLS**

MOTIVATION
(Fig. 5)
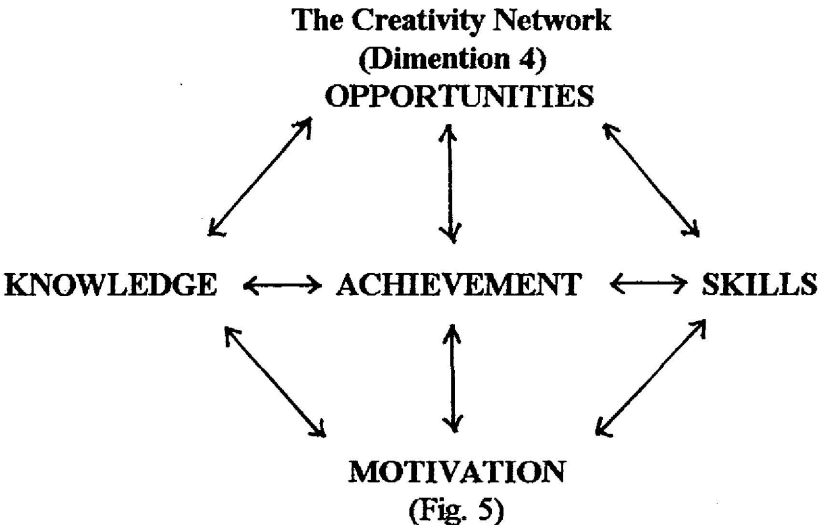
Confidence is no less important to students wanting to be creative. Believing in oneself is already a step forward towards achieving a set goal. The literacy project in schools has its utmost important goal in building the children's self-esteem to boost their ego so that they believe that they can do it; having self-worth; able to self-educate; and having locus of control for the formation of a proper self-concept. These are the components which make up Dimension (5).

The Confidence Network
Dimension 5

SENSE OF EFFICACY

LOCUS OF CONTROL ⟷ FORMATION OF SELF-CONCEPT ⟷ VALUE OF SELF-CONCEPT

SELF-EDUCATION
(Fig. 6)

Philosophy and Objectives
Kim (1995) states that the philosophy of the project is the cooperation between the schools and the university to research and develop literacy among school children. It is envisaged that literacy must be dealt with as early as possible in the school system. As such it is the intention of the project to begin developing literacy programmes among the primary school children between the ages of nine and twelve. There are three important values attached to the project as part of its philosophy to guide teachers in particular. The values of caring, sharing and developing must be seen taking place during the process of project implementation. The teachers care for the children's education, while the children share their ideas and products leading to the development of their creativity. These values are meant to empower teachers and students alike to use their initiatives to acquire and expand knowledge.

The Relationship Between
Project Values

CARING

SHARING ⟷ ⟷ DEVELOPMENT
(Fig. 7)

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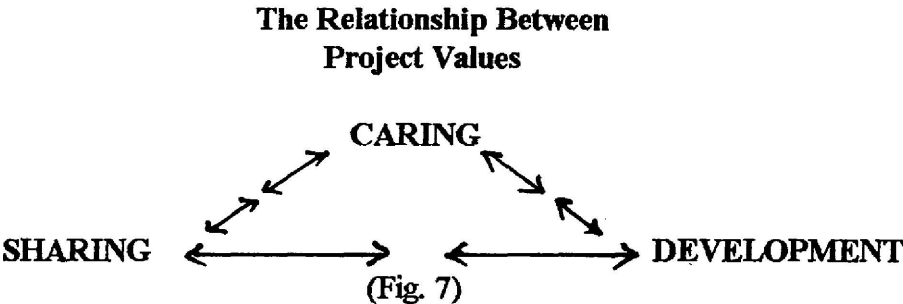
The implementation of the project is based on the following assumptions:
1) that teaching and learning are joint enterprises between teachers and students where participants have complementary roles to play on almost similar status;
2) that writing is a thinking process in its own right. It demands conscious intellellectual efforts, which usually has to be sustained over a considerable period of time;
3) that the students have multiple intelligence which are latent and need to be tapped;
4) that with proper guidance and motivation they should be able to use them for a good cause.

Based on the above assumptions, the conceptualization of the project therefore, requires participants (teachers, students, researchers) to be pro-active rather than reactive. It also takes great pains and time consuming to see the success of this project.

The objectives of the project as stated at the preamble of the research proposal are:
1) To create new avenues of cooperation among the project participants to exchange ideas in order to enhance the development of literacy in schools.
2) To introduce new environment for the encouragement of cooperation towards the attainment of high literacy level in schools.
3) To produce, edit and publish literary work by students.
4) To continue researching and developing literary process.
5) To distribute the children's work to the public.

The Development of Creative Writing
Creative writing in schools, which is the focus of this project, is seen not merely by its end product but also in the cognitive and physical behaviors that characterised the writing process. During the process of writing, while children are being encouraged to search and bring out information, they would undoubtedly encounter problems such as what to say and how to say it. The present trend in our school system, where the writing of composition is still stereo-type, creativity is very much tied down to certain directives and conditions imposed on the students as to the number of words and topics which have been predetermined. The questions of what to say and how to say are in fact have already been decided for them.

Creative writing must be seen as a spontanious expression of imagination or ideas which ought to be regarded as within the right of inviduals to do so. As such freedom of expression should be the main thrust of any creative writing as stated by Ulleyette J.M. (1968) and as quoted by Green G.A. and Walter T.P. (1971):

"is the child's respond to the world aound him.............. (the) putting of his thoughts on paper in the form of a story, article, poem, letter, or play... ....(with the emphasis always) on the freedom of expression."

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Under our literacy project, the emphasis has been that the writing must exhibit the following characteristics:

1) It must reflect in the writing their imagination, ideas and feelings;
2) The arrangement and structure must be free from teacher's intervention as far as possibe. Their originality must always be maintained at all times although teachers may guide them if and when it is found to be necessary;
3) It must allow for different reactions of individuals towards certain things or events;
4) Children must be allowed to express and act in any manner that could help them develop creatively in their own way.

The role of a teacher is only to facilitate its development by creating the right climate or environment so that they can feel the sense of freedom of expression without the teacher's intervention. They must also be made to feel that their writings are accepted which will bring about the feeling of self-worth and confidence. In order to create a conducive climate, in the classroom, they must be made aware of the opportunities as well as the spirit of willingness to participate in the process of exchanging ideas between teachers and students. Every student must feel free and be at ease to express ideas and that their ideas are always welcomed and acceptable.

Creative writing in school is in actual fact a skill by itself deriving from various learning experiences of the students as well as their thinking ability. The attempt to allow students to express their ideas and felings regardless of forms and structures should be our main focus in promoting creativity.

This research project looks at creativity in writing as belonging to the individuals as well as to society whereby the personal precedes the social. In handling creative writing, teachers were asked to recognise certain aspects involved in the creative process and how they relate to one another. If we want the final product of creative writing not to confine to only intellectual ctivities but also involving their perceptions, feelings and imaginations, then students must be given full reedom to write in their own way and that the product should not be disputed.

The Concept of Process Writing
To achieve the objectives of creative writing, the concept of process writing is used as an approach or method throughout the entire project. This approach is preferred over other approaches for the simple reason that we perceive the writing process as comprising of various steps that made up the process. It is also developmental in nature most suitable to beginners which could help bring about creativity in children.

According to White and Aendt, (1989), the various processes entail in the act of writing are generating ideas, focussing, structuring, drafting, evaluating, and re-writing. Since these operations apply to the creation of any peace of writing, irrespective of the the topics, the procedures as suggested can be used in any text and at any level whether

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it is to the primary or secondary school children. Teachers are free to adjust the procedures according to the students' interest as well as the requirements of each teaching context. Thus the guide model for the project is derived from White and Arndt (1989) as illustrated in figure (8):

Process Writing
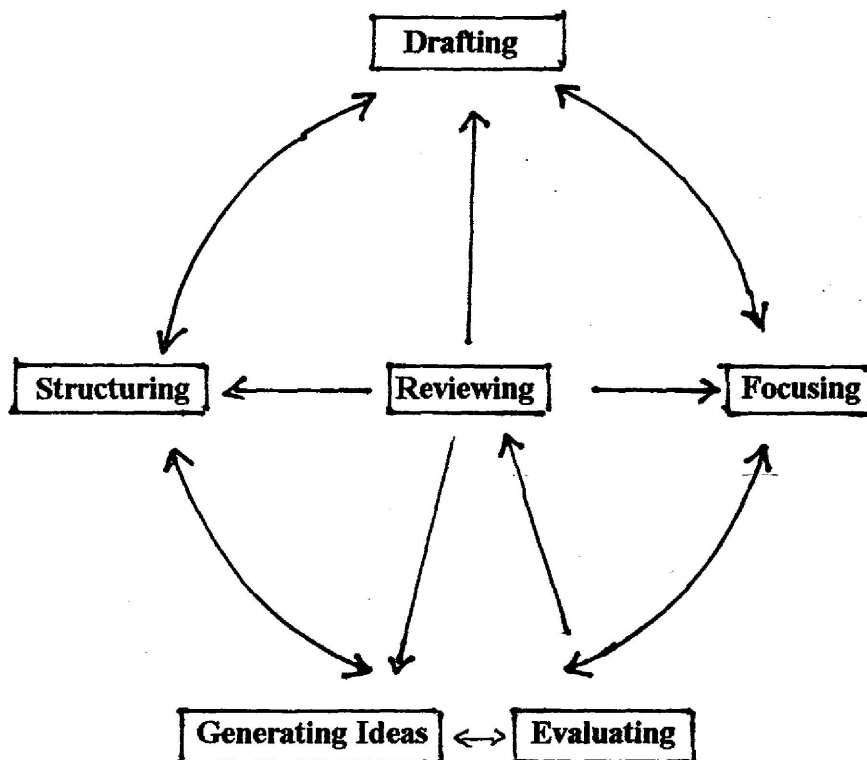
(Fig. 8)

Writing is a complex and difficult process. In fact some cognitive psychologists have described it as the most complex and demanding of all cognitive activities (White & Arndt, 1989). Although different types of writing call for different types of thinking skills, memories and experiences, they nonetheless go through approximately the same process.

The current most common practice in our classroom today is to ask students to write as many essays as possible with correct grammar, proper paragraphs, good arrangement of ideas and very well organized. There is nothing wrong with that except that more often than not students are unable to produce such essays because they are

It is a common teaching phenemenon to see a teacher teaching writing to begin the lesson by introducing the topic to the students and stating the format that has already been determined. This is usually followed by asking students to search for some points (at least four). The students are then asked to write an essay about those points in a proper way and with correct grammer. Quite often, the weaker students find it diffiult to compose an essay which result in frustation and demotivation. Even if they are able to write anything at all, they write in exactly the same way without any extention of ideas. To make matters worse, children are asked to complete the assingment in the stipulated time frame usually within one or two periods. Teachers have high expectation of their students and the end results are what matter most. Little do they realized that students are not able to achieve the desired target because they have not been given the opportunity to go through the processes of writing in order to produce quality essays.

Generating ideas is clearly a crucial part of the writing process (White and Arndt 1989). It is important as an initiating process and goes on throughout the entire cycle. All other activities can be regarded as a follow up and belonging to the initial stage so that the techniques used to stimulate ideas at an initial stage may still prove to be useful to all other stages. This is so because ideas can come at any stage of the writing process.

There are various ways by which teachers can help students generate ideas. The most common method is by brainstorming which can be done between teachers and students or between students and students. Brainstorming is an effective way to allow the students' mind to be set free so that ideas can keep on flowing. These ideas can be for actual content or ideas for organizing the content. Brainstorming involves thinking quickly and without inhibitions so as to produce as many ideas as possible in a given topic or theme. At this stage teachers should not censor any ideas other than those allowed under decency and politeness. Since brainstorming is almost alien in Malaysian classrooms, teachers are asked to help and encourage students in whatever way possible in order to attain this objective.

Another way is for teachers to use questions. By encouraging students to ask interesting questions within themselves and this would yield interesting answers. As with brainstorming, teachers can give a series of questions in order to stimulate their thinking and at the same time draw up their experiences to shape up ideas.

Once the ideas have been shaped, the next stage is to focus on these ideas. At this stage of focussing, students are asked to choose and select its focal point. Here, students must decide what they wish to be included in their writing. The focal point or the main - idea will act as central point where all other ideas will be built upon or structured and this brings us to the next stage of structuring.

Structuring information entails various organizational processes of grouping ideas together and deciding upon how to sequence them. However, children may find difficulty at this stage deciding which should come first or which should be put later until they actually start writing. This is where the role of the teacher is important in encouraging students to write irrespective of whether they think the organization is right or otherwise. This no doubt requires a little bit of an effort and a lot of patience on the part of the teacher.
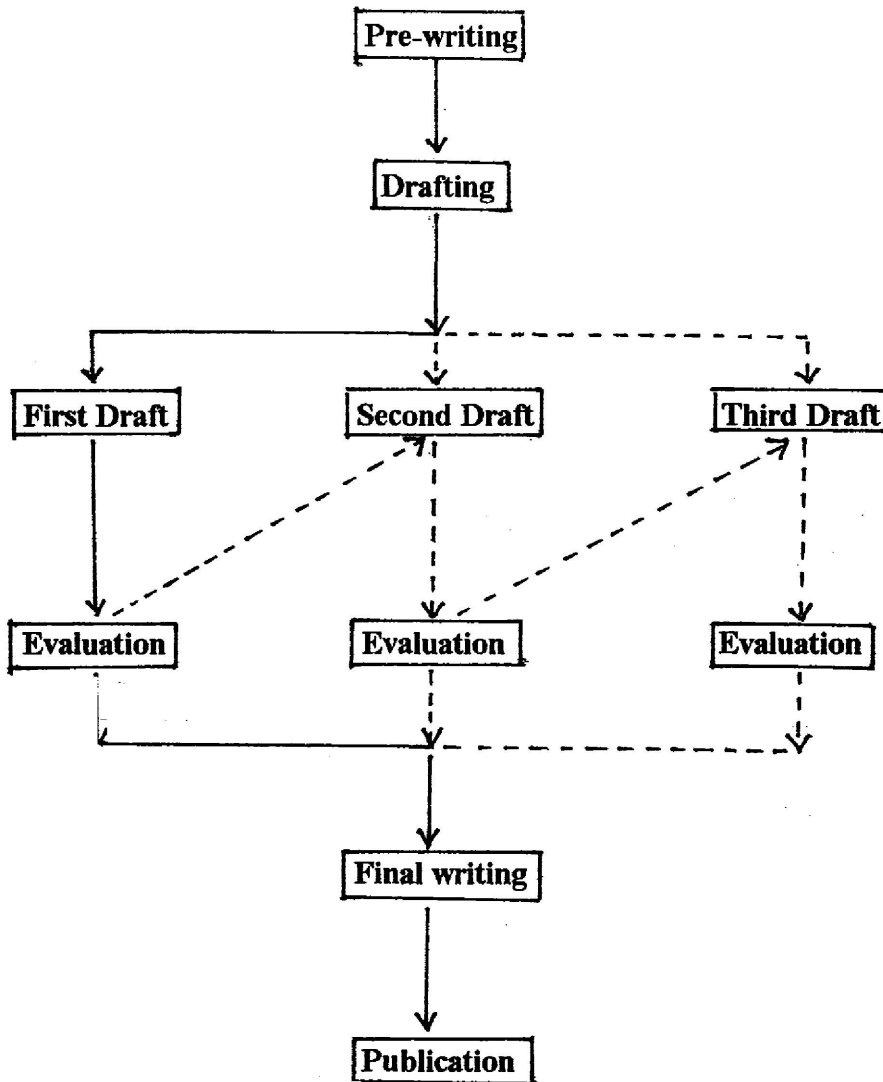
This brings us to the next stage of writing out a draft. This is the stage where the students actually start the activity of writing itself. The tasks set for students at this stage may very according to what the focus is. They probably range from writing parts of the text, shorter pieces of writing or longer complete essays. Similarly, the number of drafts also vary according to the topics, students' abilities or other circumstances that may require the drafts to be redone. The activity of drafting is followed by evaluating and further discussion with students. The emphasis here is not just having teachers to assess the students' writing, but students themselves must be taught to be self-critical. It is helpful though to have feedback from ther people and to assess one's own writing even at the drafting stage, because things that are not clear or which could be improved upon can still be changed. Evaluation must not be perceived merely as looking for mistakes but also the underlying coherence of writing in itself (White and Arndt 1989).

The last stage in the process is re-viewing which entails the task of re-looking at the whole text. It requires a sense of judgement by which White and Arndt (1989) describe it as the final judgement before abondoning it to the readers. In this activity, the focus is on overall assessment of the text to check how successful it has been. The decision whether the writing is final and that there is no need for another draft is done jointly between a teacher and a student. Normally under this project we allow only to a maximum of three drafts unless there is a special case.

Development of a Model of Process Writing
For the purpose of this project, the model of White and Arndt (1989) has been modified to suit our teachers who are used to the Ministry's guidelines of process writing. The modified version combined the earlier activities of generating ideas, structuring and focussing into one ctivity of pre-writing. Subsequently, this is followed by the activity of writing out the draft. The ensuing activity is evaluating and further discussion with students. The same activity will recur if the second or even the third draft become necessary. The research model constructed can be seen in figure (9) and summary of activities in figure (10).
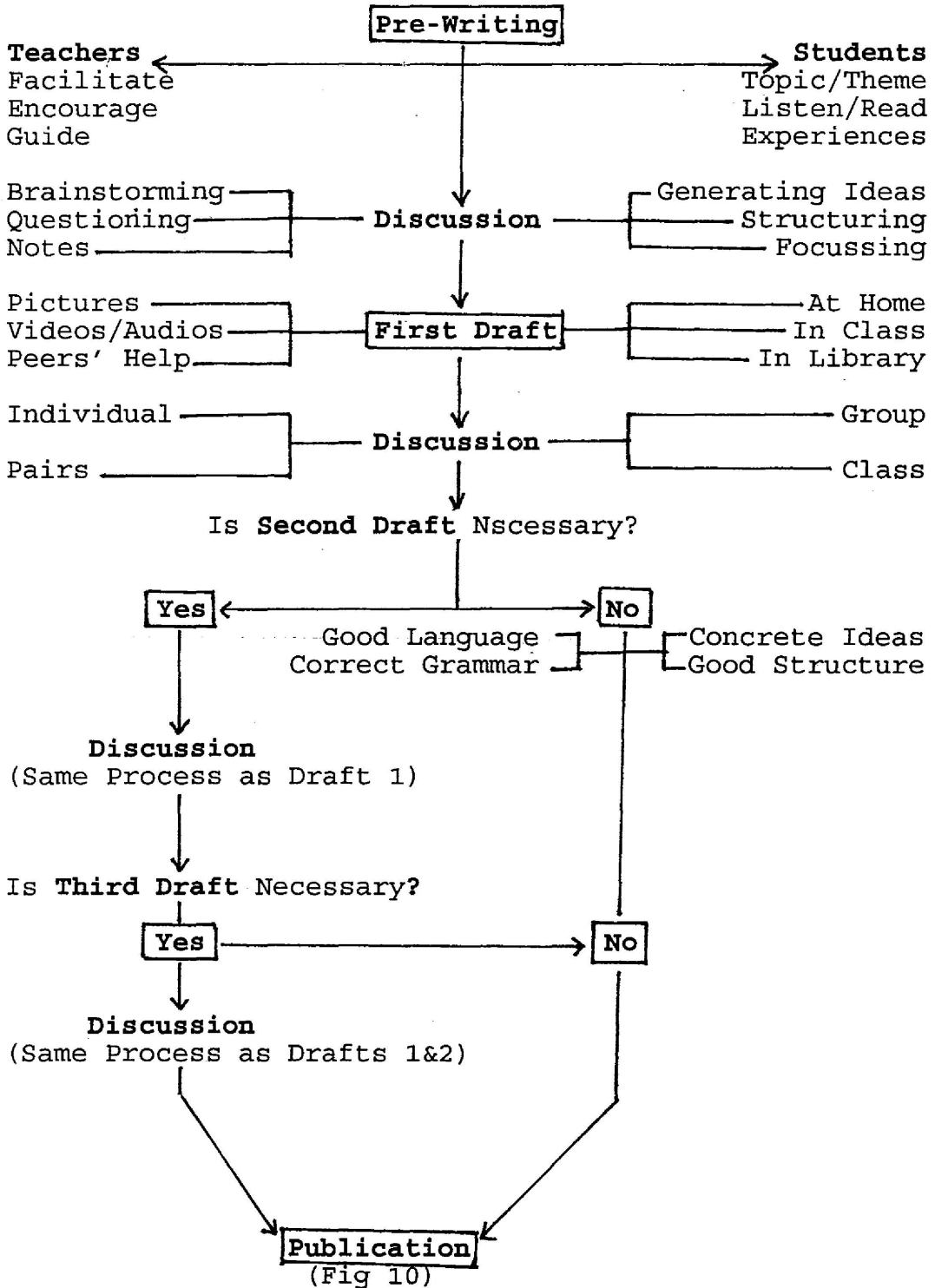
Research Model of process Writing

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                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │  Pre-writing │
                    └──────┬───────┘
                           │
                           ▼
                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │  Drafting    │
                    └──────┬───────┘
                           │
        ┌──────────────────┼──────────────────┐
        ▼                  ▼                  ▼
 ┌─────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
 │ First Draft │   │ Second Draft │   │ Third Draft  │
 └──────┬──────┘   └──────┬───────┘   └──────┬───────┘
        │                 │                  │
        ▼                 ▼                  ▼
 ┌─────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
 │ Evaluation  │   │ Evaluation   │   │ Evaluation   │
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                          ▼
                   ┌──────────────┐
                   │ Final writing│
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                          │
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(Fig. 9)

Implications on Teachers and Students

From the start of the project, until the present moment only seven schools were selected on a trial basis. Although we received more requests from various other schools, it is most unfortunate that we were not able to provide our experties consultation due to financial and manpower constraints. The rejection was also due to the fact that we would rather concentrate on fewer schools than accept an unmanageble number since the project is still in an infancy stage. However, we hope to produce

Pocess Writing
Summary of Activities

Pre-Writing

Teachers
Facilitate
Encourage
Guide

Students
Topic/Theme
Listen/Read
Experiences

Brainstorming
Questioning
Notes

Discussion

Generating Ideas
Structuring
Focussing

Pictures
Videos/Audios
Peers' Help

First Draft

At Home
In Class
In Library

Individual

Pairs

Discussion

Group

Class

Is **Second Draft** Nscessary?

Yes

No

Good Language
Correct Grammar

Concrete Ideas
Good Structure

Discussion
(Same Process as Draft 1)

Is **Third Draft** Necessary?

Yes

No

Discussion
(Same Process as Drafts 1&2)

Publication
(Fig 10)

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some experts out of the teachers themselves who will later provide expert advise to other schools.

We have also been approached by publishers who were impressed by the writings of the children and wanted to publish them for additional readings for school children. They contended that up to now our readers, especially in the primary schools are written by adults. It is the adults that determine what the children ought and like to read. The time has come that children themselves determine what they like to read and be written by their own peers.

The effect of this project to teachers and children alike can be summarized in the teachers' own words, and here is an account of Eleen Juanna Chin (1995), one of the teachers who has been part of the project team. Other teachers in the project team too have expressed more or less the same feeling where at the beginning they were rather skeptical of the students' abilities but at the end they were quite surprised but satisfied with the results. The first batch of teachers who were in the team now conduct their own literacy projects in schools where they teach.

At the beginning of the project:
"When I was first asked to join the project which involves editting and compiling pupils' writing, I was most pessimistic and apprehensive over their abilities and capabilities of writing in English. In fact I was on tenterhooks. As usual, when the idea was first presented to the pupils, they were apalled, and opposed strongly to the idea. Through much persuations and encouragement, I managed to get a few to write. I chose a theme which was familiar and close to their hearts. As Chinese New Year was approaching, I caught on the pupils' excitement and their coy moods prompted me to choose this theme."

At the end of the project:
"At the end of it all, after straining every nerve to get the pupils to write, I was jubilant over the end product. It was gratifying and rewarding to see the pupils smiling with approval and beaming with excitement and pride..... I hope the pupils will not stop at this but instead be encouraged and motivated to write more. I applaud the pupils who have contributed in writing. The two booklets speak volumes for their brave attempts to write. I beleive this to be a breakthrough and a new beginning for many to express themselves in English. May it be a stepping stone and spur them on to write in a more flexible and varied style".

Conclusion
This literacy project is meant to give teachers a platform as well as some exposures for them to carry out classroom-based research by way of action research. For many, this has been a new experience and a rare opportunity that would spur them to dwell into a new dimension of their teaching career in order to seek new solutions to

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their old teaching problems in an interesting and creative manner. Without doubt it is an innovative approach which has brought about changes in pedagogy to the teachers concerned.

In the past, under the traditional methods, when teachers talked about teaching problems, they often discussed in great length and in depth the mistakes or errors made by students and how to correct them. The emphasis was on the mistakes and rarely do they mention about their efforts in sharing the thoughts and feelings with the children in writings and drawings or conversations. They seldom notice or find out the characteristics of developmental differences in writing among students and how to improve their teaching to cater for these developmental differences. Thus, this project addresses the long standing issues of teachers' understanding of the processes of learning to learn and learning to write.

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