

Developing Singapore school leaders



David Ng Foo Seong

Singapore has always related its economic development and racial harmony to education. School reforms received added impetus in the wake of the 1985-86 economic recession. An Economic Committee recommended the education of each individual to his or her maximum potential, and the development of creativity and flexible skills in order to maintain Singapore's international competitiveness in the global economy (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, 1986). The need for creativity and innovation was repeated in a report by the Economic Planning Committee in 1991 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, 1991). Once again, schools and universities were called upon to play a major role in bringing about this change.

The introduction of 'Thinking schools, learning nation' (TSLN), which was first introduced by the Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in July 1997, became the central theme for the current tidal wave of education reform in Singapore. The concept of the learning nation requires the individual in school to use the tools of information technology, think creatively and critically, and live and work globally in a networked world over their lifetime. School leaders are being identified to attend emerging learning programmes that will prepare them to design, lead and manage thinking schools in a learning nation.

Leaders in Education Programme: a new national initiative

The new educational agenda demanded a new type of school leader, one who could cope proactively with a dynamic, complex and sometimes uncertain context. The old leadership thrived on conformity while the new leadership had to be ambitious, independent, innovative, and able to succeed in conditions that are less clearly defined.

In March 2001, the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) was launched at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. The programme aims to produce chief executive officers for schools, who can demonstrate extraordinary performance operating in an emerging learning nation environment.

The new programme has an executive orientation similar in scope and intensity to some of the highly rated executive courses in leading business schools, but with the prime focus on education. It is a full-time programme of just six months so that its graduates can return to the system quickly.

Innovative features of LEP

The new programme aims to produce innovative principals as chief executive officers who can take their schools to new heights of performance. In order to do this, a diverse, powerful and innovative learning agenda must be put in place and we believe is different from what has been attempted in comparable executive programmes across the world.

From competency-based to complexity-based

The competency-based model for designing leadership programmes has been viewed as inadequate in the preparation of educational leadership, particularly in the increasingly complex and fast-paced changing world. Competency-based programme development and training has been the dominant design for the past 50 years. The theoretical underpinning for such design rested upon the behavioural science era when knowledge was viewed as a set of prescribed skills, roles and behaviours. While acknowledging the continual importance of the behavioural sciences, there is also a recognition that such prescription is no longer sufficient to prepare leaders to lead and to thrive in the new landscape.

In the last decade, we have seen the progression from strategic choice theory to learning organisation theory, to open systems theory, and now to chaos and complexity theory. This progression suggests a move to take into account the complexity of interactions, uncertainty, unpredictability, and their relationship with diversity and creativity within an organisation. Complexity deals with the nature of emergence, innovation, learning and adaptation.

Educational institutions are not machines although they tend to operate like machines. They are made up of highly engaging and dynamic individuals within social settings. The dynamic interactions between individuals and the environment often result in adaptive and emerging structures and knowledge. The complexity-based design of the LEP is described in the following features.

Knowledge creation through innovation project

Participants, as innovators in a knowledge-based economy, are attached to a school throughout the programme and they spend regular weekly time in that school carrying out a major innovation



project. They receive support and guidance from the principal of that school, the cluster superintendent and the university faculty member. The project is expected to yield rich benefits to the school in terms of needed improvements and is meant to be a profound learning experience for the participant.

The best parallel is from the contemporary business world, particularly in the area of new enterprises, where the concept of the 'angel' has appeared. An angel is an individual who invests resources in an innovative project through its period of incubation and then reaps the harvest of marketable results. In the case of the school attachment, the equivalent individual invests in the innovative project of facilitating the participant's development, as a principal-in-training, by opening up a range of learning opportunities and engaging in dialogue and discussion.

This pioneering model provides the platform for participants to create new knowledge and to repackage knowledge in order to produce useful results. It requires them to be innovators. In the short time that they spend in the school attachment, they must lead others (teachers, students, parents) to do new things and must find different ways of doing existing things. The whole purpose is to take the school to a higher level of achievement.

In brief, the project involves them in looking at a school from the standpoint of its strengths, and then identifying a range of innovation opportunities. From these opportunities will emerge the potential for a comparatively significant innovation. Essentially, they need to answer fundamental questions about their role as an innovative principal: how can I be innovative? and how can I encourage others to be innovative?

Their innovation is carried out in a school and is a powerful test of their leadership capability. To date, participants have successfully completed a wide array of innovative projects and many of these projects have been sustained by the schools.

Syndicates

The syndicate is a key component of the programme. Participants meet in a small group setting (five or six members) along with the syndicate leader who is a faculty staff member and will act as a facilitator. The syndicate leader will monitor participants' learning throughout the programme, including the school-based learning, the learning from the international visit, and the broader classroom-based learning. An intensive learning relationship will thus develop between participants and their syndicate leader, and among fellow participants. The syndicate meetings generally take place on a weekly basis.

The basis for syndicate meetings is to encourage divergent and exploration thinking through conversation. Conversations are complex responsive processes of themes triggering other themes through self-organising associations and turn-taking that both reflect and create power differentials in relationships. These conversational processes within the group result in a continuing development of the minds of the individual participants. Individual and group phenomena emerge together in the same process, co-creating each other. This is a very radical view of the nature of the relationship between the individual and the group. It is saying that change in the behaviour of a group and change in the behaviour of individual members is exactly the same phenomenon.

Furthermore, it is saying that change can only occur when the pattern of conversation changes because it is this that organises their experience.

If one takes this perspective, that an organisation is a pattern of talk (relational constraints), then the organisation changes only insofar as its conversational life (power relations) evolves. Organisational change is the same thing as change in the pattern of talk and therefore the pattern of power relations. Creativity, novelty and innovation are all the emergence of new patterns of talk and patterns of power relations.

Partnerships in learning

Much of the learning is through strong partnerships with schools, business organisations, and educational institutions both in Singapore and overseas, and is supported by learning in the university class and tutorials.

These participants are exposed to leadership in the business organisations and to ideas from various sources, including government organisations. To further enhance such influences, key officers are invited from the education, civil and other ministries to engage in dialogue with participants and to observe some of the work undertaken on the programme.

There is also an international component to the programme. This is a two-week, all expenses paid international visit by the participants led by the syndicate leader and a senior school principal. The team investigates successful innovative practices overseas, undertakes critical analyses, and gains significant insights into how educational innovation in Singapore might be managed. The inclusion of this component, while not unique, adds prestige and raises the programme's profile on the international stage. So far, participants have visited Switzerland, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Scandinavian countries, Europe, China, Australia, and Hong Kong.

Action learning delivery: content as learning support

While the interest of most leadership programmes is directed at the 'content' of a programme, the LEP emphasises 'delivery' as the focus of learning. The content is there as learning support, but the delivery architecture is what sets it apart from other programmes. Action learning is a central concept in the delivery of learning. In this concept, participants know what they are taught, but they do not know what they will learn. They have to create their own knowledge through team learning, and this takes place in the syndicates. They know what knowledge they have created only when they come to the end of the programme through these intensive weekly meetings.

In the LEP, action learning is understood as group learning among people who are committed to action by using acquired learning for obtaining systems-wide outcomes. Its original formulation by Revans (Marquardt, 1999, p. 19) is $L = P + Q$, where L is learning, P is programmed knowledge and Q is questioning insight. In the LEP, programmed knowledge (P) refers to what is taught in the seven modules, what is read, presentations by guest speakers, and all other opinions, theories and shared know-how. Learning (L) is different from the traditional formulation, which equates



learning and programmed knowledge. In LEP, the seven modules are relegated to a support role.

Future school project

Participants will undertake this major assignment through a team learning process. This assignment is a major undertaking, for it forms a significant contribution to the process of knowledge creation and will involve participants in drawing together their learning from multiple sources.

In this project participants are expected to design a school that can be opened in 15-30 years' time. It is a school for the future. At the same time, it is a school for Singapore and they need to temper their thinking with certain realities. It is essentially about knowledge creation, by drawing on the power of the group and on the multiple sources of influence participants encounter in the programme. The project also serves to open their mind to new possibilities and to provoke them to challenge all their assumptions and be able to defend their thinking.

International standing

Since the launch of LEP in 2001, it has generated intense interests from many developed and developing countries in the world. The success of the LEP internationally can be seen in its introduction of a short two-week LEP international conference. Participants from Australia, India, Macau, Indonesia, and Malaysia have attended the programme. This year we will have participants from Germany and 12 other regional countries participating in the programme. In addition, we have specially tailored the programme for selected high performing principals from Abu Dhabi who come to Singapore for a month-long LEP.

Conclusion

The Singapore government has always regarded education reform as a way to maintain its own competitiveness and to uphold its reputation as a city state of high quality.

Over the years, and through the 'Thinking schools, learning nation' initiative, decentralisation in the education sector has allowed individual schools to have more autonomy and to be responsible for their own development plans. Through the leadership programmes such as the LEP, leaders are better equipped to lead and manage schools to meet the challenges of the knowledge-based economy and to fulfill the national agenda of Singapore.

References

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Biographical notes

Dr David Ng Foo Seong is Associate Dean for Leadership Programmes at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. His areas of specialisation include school leadership, curriculum management, and technology-assisted learning (such as computer simulation, programming and intelligent tutoring systems). He has been responsible for numerous leadership courses given to school principals, educational officers, heads of department, and to undergraduate as well as graduate students in Singapore, the United States of America, Malaysia, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere in the region.