

Leadership in 21st-century schools

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Introduction

Students of the 21st century want an environment that is about learning, not just memorisation. They want to be part of the process of learning, to build connections that would foster 'learning to learn'. The young people of today are the digital generation, and generations before them find baffling their ability to multitask and their ease with technologies that change faster than the speed of a bullet train. However, many schools are still in the 19th century where rote learning, memorisation, drills and teacher-centred learning are the norm. In order to lead schools into the 21st century, the role of leadership is indisputably important. School heads have to be forward-thinking, create an environment that is conducive to the digital generation, ensure that teachers are suitably trained, supported and motivated, and that the whole school climate is conducive to learning; ultimately, schools have to become knowledge-based organisations.

The 21st century digital generation

According to results of many researches, young adults and even children are significant users of new information technologies. The use of the Internet is very high, and in the USA, about 95.9 per cent of young people between the ages of 18 and 24, who attend schools or colleges, use a computer. However, in most countries, those in the lower-income groups will have lower percentage of users than the higher-income groups. This is where schools must play their part in providing this important resource to all students regardless of their background. It is common knowledge that young people have embraced the Internet when conducting their daily activities, from completing their school assignments, to playing games and communicating with their cyberfriends all over the world. Surfing the net, downloading music, blogging, emailing, playing computer games, texting, etc. are all common knowledge and 'www' to this generation can mean 'Whatever, Wherever, Whenever'. Learning can take place anywhere; young people want to be 'engaged' (active learners) and to be empowered as independent learners who can analyse, experiment and evaluate what they learn.

So, how do schools teach this digital generation? According to South Korea's Deputy Prime Minister and Education Resources Development Minister, Dr Kim Jin-Pyo (*Sunday Star*, 11 December 2005), 'It's important that we empower teachers to learn innovative teaching that can make a difference to how they teach our future generation.' From the same newspaper article, Professor

Eduardo Chaves, Co-ordinator of the UNESCO Chair in Education and Human Development at the Ayrton Senna Institute in São Paulo, Brazil, reiterated in his keynote address: 'Teach less; watch and listen more ... The world is changing, and teachers must change with the rest of the world.' It is most certainly true that learning can take place anywhere, anytime and even anyhow. The accessibility of knowledge through the Internet has allowed this to take place. Students are more creative and would definitely learn more from hands-on and experiential learning. The shift could be from their dependence on a traditional teacher to one who is willing to allow them to think, explore, innovate and create. Are our teachers giving them this opportunity? The world today is looking for more than a workforce who is hard-working and disciplined. Schools need to keep up with the times to ensure that students acquire thinking and critical minds and even entrepreneurial skills. To achieve all the above, school heads have an imperative role to play.

Schools of today

Schools are institutions that disseminate learning and ensure that students receive an education to prepare them for the working world. Sergiojanni's (2007) idea of moral leadership, where the objective of schools is to have a learning community, where there is a collection of individuals – school leaders, teachers, parents and the community – who are bonded together by natural will and bound together by a set of shared ideas and ideals is food for thought.

Teachers play a central role in the children's learning and it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that life's most important lessons are still imparted without the use of technology/computers. However, it is my intention to argue that 21st century classrooms need teachers who can turn the power of computer technology into teaching tools that captivate students, motivate them and ultimately move them into greater learning. Our digitally savvy students need these electronic devices to act as a catalyst for their learning and, if properly used, technology will engage students in the 'real 3Rs' – rigour, relevance and relationship.

Dr Timothy Hawkes, headmaster of The King's School in Sydney, Australia, during an International Conference of Educators in Malaysia (*Sunday Mail*, 3 April 2005), reiterated that 'the teacher's job is more than just preparing students for university... it is more special and more important... it is preparing students for life'. He continued to stress that teachers are the dynamism of the school

and that principals need to dare to innovate and stray from the norm, not be mere administrators. A dynamic school, said Dr Hawkes, is one with a vibrant leadership, energetic staff and school community, and a curriculum that attracts and excites students. Most importantly, dynamic schools must produce dynamic students, who are well-balanced and not necessarily those who score straight As. Schools should not just feed knowledge to the students, but instead inspire and encourage them to seek knowledge for themselves. To add greater dimension, schools need to follow UNESCO's four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

Implementing the 3Rs (rigour, relevance and relationship)

The 'rigour' of education encompasses the teaching of a planned curriculum. Subjects are taught to ensure learning takes place and students are assessed and rewarded according to what they have learned and how much they score in examinations. How the subject matters are taught depends on the methodologies adopted by the teachers, but with these 21st century students who are more technologically able, mere rote learning or memorisation will not be stimulating enough to acquire knowledge. The use of the Internet could allow them to research, write and design their own homework, and make learning rigorous with in-depth discussion about their work with teachers and friends.

The materials acquired from the Internet could be checked and counter-checked for originality and different points of views. This will subsequently lead to more interest in fact-finding and ultimately make the teachers and students more knowledge-driven. When the students take possession of their learning, they also learn to become more critical about everything that they learn. Students have to take charge of their learning and not just regurgitate what they have learned from the teachers, while teachers have to give them this opportunity through the aid of new technologies. Learning will then be relevant to the students, who will be able to demonstrate their mastery in using the various technologies that have become the norm for them.

To implement 'rigour' and 'relevance', school principals need to provide the proper infrastructure and training for the teachers. They also need the resources to be up-to-date and reliable and they must be readily available. Headteachers need to be role models in the use of technology, as well as form a team of middle managers who are also passionate about the transformational change introduced by their principal.

The third 'R' ('relationship') is also crucial. The relationship between all stakeholders (principal, teachers, students, parents and the community) will play a significant role as the synergy between these people will ensure that the school, which is a learning community, will be willing to embrace whatever change is going to take place. Everyone will be able to share the same vision and work towards ensuring that the mission is accomplished. Students' relationship with the use of technology will also motivate them to learn more, as they are in control of a medium they are familiar with. With encouragement from teachers and parents, where there is a relationship of trust and mutual agreement, the motivation to learn will definitely be higher.

The application of information and communication technology (ICT) has been the most powerful change agent in the educational world over the last 20 years (Davies and Ellison, 1999). John West-Burnham believes that technology has fulfilled its potential only when deep learning has taken place. Students must be guided and helped by their teachers, who in turn must be trained and supported by all stakeholders. Students who do not have access to the Internet at home must be given support/access in the schools, where there should be learning/resource centres available to them out of hours. It is even believed that children who have never held a textbook in their hands will 'hold the world' one day because they have access and connectivity through the computer. The proponents of the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) will attest to the fact that encouragement of creativity through the use of the Internet will enhance the use of both the left and the right brain. When students are more balanced in their brain development, they are also able to explore the potential of exploiting their other intelligences, hence becoming more balanced individuals.

School leadership must be visionary to transform schools to fit into the 21st century and continue to ensure that students become learners who constantly engage in their learning. They must ensure that students are emotionally attached to what they learn, which will in turn motivate them to be independent learners. While these students are connected worldwide in their learning, they are also exposed to people from all over the world. The classrooms then become a 'potpourri' of multiculturalism, where everyone can learn from anyone, and where the ideals of love, tolerance, respect and acceptance will hopefully become natural sentiments shared among them – values that the world badly needs these days.

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