

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

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The focus areas of the School Management Group are leadership and management of the Singapore schools we visited from 20th to 23rd March, 2001. This is a report on what is happening in these schools, how they are led and how they succeed in promoting effectiveness and improvement in their schools. It was through the recommendation of our mutual friend and the arrangement of the SMC that we came into contact with them. We found that they are successful in promoting well-rounded education evident from their outstanding performance in public examinations. Some schools are winners of the Value-added Award and made remarkable improvement. As continuous improvement is our vision, we could become better schools by learning from each other. Our intention is to understand what factors make these schools outperform others. However, we understand it would be difficult to generalise findings into a theory. We understand that practices that work in one place may not work elsewhere. We need to understand the background of the schools as well as the environment of Singapore. Direct transfer of their practices without much thought could be fruitless.

The Stories Of Success

Anglican High School is a Christian school with a history of 45 years. It acquired Autonomous School Status in 1995. Its intake is from the top 10%. All students study the Special/Express Stream and they take GCSE 'O' Level at the end of Secondary 4. Student performance in the public examination is always excellent as it is always one of the top 50 secondary schools in Singapore. 92% to 97% of the students are qualified for junior college (sixth form). It promotes a well-rounded education and character development is emphasised. All students take part in sports programmes and the school is good at basketball, table tennis, badminton and net-ball. All except a few (less than 5%) students are physically fit. The school won the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA) in Physical Fitness because this record has been maintained for a number of years. The school also won another SAA in Uniform Groups including the National Cadet Corps, because of their good performance in this respect for some years. The school is quite ambitious in training students to be community leaders and political leaders. The school organises Enhancement Programmes for all students. Students receive training of public speech in English in Secondary 1 and Secondary 2, and leadership training in Secondary 3.

Dunman Secondary School is a school with a history of 38 years and it operates both Express Stream and Normal Stream. The students in both streams have excellent performance. The school is ranked 38th in the Express Stream and 9th in the Normal Stream in 2000. It won the Value-added Award for the Express Stream in 1995 and the Value-added Award in the Normal Stream in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2000. It is also a top ten Value-added School in the Normal Stream. A

teacher won the Inspiring Chinese Teacher Award which is an important national award for teachers in Singapore. It acquired its autonomous school status in the year 2001. Being an autonomous school, the school is given extra resource equivalent to an amount of S \$300 per student. They can use the money with flexibility to organise extra programmes for their students and for other school purposes. The school has other achievements in co-curricular activities. One of these achievements is the winning of the Hibiscus Award 2000 for Green Audit Care of the school. Dunman has an emphasis of instilling Five Fundamental Values in students. They are Diligence, Discernment, Discipline, Determination and Duty. Altogether they called them the 5 Ds' of Dunman. Leadership Development Programme is organised for student leaders at all levels. Work Experience Programme is organised to develop students' interest in specific career areas. A collaborative project with the CISCO Networking is organised. Students are so lucky as they are able to work with a world-class computer firm while studying in this secondary school. In fact, the success of the school does not lead to complacency. The school takes 'Learning Organisation' as its development model. The theme for the school in the year 2001 is 'In Continuous Pursuit of Personal Mastery'. Teachers in Dunman are encouraged to receive professional development for 100 hours in areas related to their academic subjects, personal development and co-curricular activities. The Principal, Mrs Neo, considered professional development programme and partnership with parents and outside agents to be their strengths. Dunman is a popular choice among primary school leavers. In 2000, there were 787 primary pupils choosing Dunman as their first choice. In 2001, the number jumped to 1241 which represented an increase of 58%. Mrs Neo considered that a key factor of the success of Dunman is the high quality of the Department Heads who always work collaboratively with each other.

Manjusri Secondary School was established in 1982 and is the only Buddhist school in Singapore. Its mission is to develop every pupil into a responsible life-long learner. The school won the Value-added Awards in the past 3 years. It ranked 40th in the Normal (Academic) Stream in 1999 and ranked 33rd in 2000. The school has very good facilities for students' performance. In addition to a big hall called the Buddhist Hall, there is a performing centre and a multi-purpose hall for the use of co-curricular activities. In fact, the school has an excellent and outstanding track record of the co-curricular activities. The school also cares about pupils who have special needs. Two containers are welded together to form an activity corner for a particular group of students. This is called the Champion Corner which is set up to provide extra care and attention for 'at-risk' pupils. The Principal, Madam Heng, reported that it was quite successful in helping the group of students to recover their self-confidence and self-esteem. In fact, a good school climate was felt during our visit. The student helpers who acted as our guides were very nice. They were polite, patient, well-mannered and helpful. Teacher development is not ignored in this school as surveys are conducted to find out training needs for teachers. Peer coaching, team teaching, developmental observation, development of IT skills and sharing of resources among teachers are part of their teacher development programme.

Serangoon Secondary School was originally known as Serangoon English School a government co-educational primary school when established in 1928. It is one of the 18 schools showing significant improvement of 10% and above, and obtained more than 50% or more O' levels in 1998. Its mission is to maximise pupils' potential to become life-long learners committed to the nation. At the top of the school web-page there is a message stressing that 'We must preserve racial and religious harmony'. Nation formation is clearly emphasised in the mission of the school. In fact, the Total Defence Day, the Racial Harmony Day, the International Friendship Day and the National Day are all celebrated. With national education as the theme, the core values of the school are self-discipline, compassion, courage and commitment. The school has a policy that every student has to

have at least one learning journey so that they could have more understanding about different cultures and beliefs. Also, students are expected to have a balanced life style. In Serangoon, there are arrangements for students to have morning run and reading periods. The purpose is to foster a reading habit in the students. In that period, students are given newspapers or other reading material to read. They are required to read in silence for half an hour. Students are not assessed on how much they have learnt during the reading period. However, students are not allowed to talk nor distract others from reading. They will be asked to stand up as a punishment if they disturb others. The school considered that the way they run the reading period works well although no assessment is carried out. The school vision is to see that the school will become the home of achievers. When talking about their school vision, the Vice-Principal Madam Lee was quite confident. She was satisfied that the school would become successful because the school embraces change as a challenge, and is able to facilitate and encourage innovation and creativity. In Serangoon, IT education is emphasized. Every student is able to gain access to a computer in one of the IT laboratories every afternoon. Students and parents are each given an email account. Students need to check their emails to see when and where tests are held. If they fail to check their mails, they will miss the tests. A Cyber Café is set up outside the library so that pupils can use the borrowed notebooks while enjoying their drinks. Also, every teacher has a notebook to use. There are training programmes for teachers who are very meaningful. For instance, a training programme on the 7 habits of personal effectiveness and an empowerment workshop were organised for teachers.

The Leaders and Their Leadership

In the visit of the schools, each school organised a presentation session for us. The presentation was conducted by the Principal or the Vice-Principal. Each presentation was clear and the content was well-organised. Main points were articulated in logical sequence and the outline prepared by PowerPoint was projected onto a big screen. Each presenter was able to communicate effectively with the audience the stories of the school's success. Other colleagues such as the Vice-Principal or the Head of Department were able to provide assistance in supplying more information whenever needs arose. They not only gave an account of what they did but also what they planned to do. It is evidenced that their conversations were carried out with conviction. They gave us a feeling that they meant what they said. They were not only confident in meeting the targets, but also in exceeding them in the future. There was a strong sense from the school leaders that they are in a continuous pursuit of excellence in education. For instance, they were not just satisfied with meeting the target of using IT in teaching 30% of the curricula. They in fact wanted to achieve more. They focused their attention on the improvement of quality in using IT. Although their common goal is to develop life-long learners, the school leaders were looking for results, in particular, visible results. In Singaporean schools, there is nothing more important than having impressive public examination results. Every school is ranked according to its examination results and a league table of top 50 schools is published annually. Also, teachers are ranked according to performance. School leaders and frontline teachers are under tremendous pressure to outperform others. Since competition among schools is very tough, school leaders need to have strong determination to compete with other schools. There is no question that the leaders of these schools have very strong determination in achieving exceptional results. Nevertheless, they were also friendly and open-minded. They were willing to answer questions on both formal and informal occasions. They proved to us that they had known their schools so well that they could always give us very concrete information. They also proved to us they were capable of getting along with people from different places very well. We felt strongly that they are capable of working with people of different cultural background. They are successful not only in dealing with tasks but also with people. These schools have teachers and

students from different races and yet their racial and religious harmony is preserved. If school leaders failed to work with people of different racial and cultural beliefs, they would not be able to lead them. If there was no collaborative effort of staff, it would not be possible to promote school effectiveness and improvement. If leadership is about determination in achieving exceptional results through people, they have shown to us that their leadership is effective. The characteristics of these award winning school leaders are their determination, open-mindedness and respecting different racial and cultural beliefs.

Visions and Missions

All schools have their clear mission and vision statements posted up on their school homepages and prominently displayed in the schools. It is quite common to see an important message openly mounted high up the front wall of the school building. It serves to remind school members of the school vision and the value the school upholds. For instance, 'Knowledge the Torch of Life' is high up at the front entrance of the Dunman Secondary School. Also, the theme of the year 2001 – 'In continuous pursuit of personal mastery' is displayed prominently at the school entrance. It serves to remind everyone of the most important value of the school upon entering it. In the process of building school vision, Dunman consulted the parents and other support groups as well. For instance, the school considered to add 'Daring' into the 5 Ds' of Dunman so that students will be more daring to experiment with new ideas. In the process of consultation, the school listened to the parents who thought that 'Daring' should come under 'Discipline' to ensure students first act with responsibility before trying to be more daring. The Principal of Manjusri, Madam Heng, also was satisfied that their vision that 'Manjusrians have the passion for learning and commitment to serve' is shared among school members. We can see that the school leaders cared to involve their stakeholders in the process of vision building. We know that vision would not have any effect unless it is shared by school members. In these schools, participation of stakeholders in vision building is emphasised. Also, it is noted that their vision statements are very brief and easy to remember. We believe this is important because a brief statement is always easier to communicate with school members. In addition to mission and vision, there are other statements to guide the development of the school such as statement of focus, values and philosophy. Through these statements, the schools make themselves clear about the pursuit of higher goals. They serve to call for engagement and commitment of school members in achieving these goals. However, the effectiveness of these statements would be difficult to measure unless they are translated into actions.

Improvement Initiatives

Each school had various improvement initiatives. Among these initiatives, we found that the teaching approach used in Dunman Secondary School was impressive. In the visit to the Dunman Secondary School, we were led to visit classrooms and to observe teaching. We moved from classroom to classroom and observed teaching of various subjects in different classes. We were surprised to find that the physical setting was quite different from that of a traditional classroom. The desks of students were not arranged in rows and columns but in groups so that pupils were sitting in small groups. The Vice-Principal, Mr. Noh, told us that they had changed the classroom setting for two years. In the visitation of classroom teaching, we found that they were using a teaching approach which was different from a traditional one. Inside the classroom, students were given active roles during the lesson. In one class, a student stood in front of the classroom to give his presentation to their classmates using IT. In another class, the students were divided into two groups to compete.

The students in one group took turns to ask questions while the students in another group gave their answers. The teacher acted more as a referee and a resource person than as a knowledge transmitter. It was more common to see that the students engaged in interactions with their fellow-students than with the teacher. They were more actively involved in group discussions than working on their own. In the classrooms, the teachers were no longer traditional teachers. They did not do all the talking but tried to let the students do it. They became enablers for student learning. They tried to involve learners more in the learning process so as to enable them to become active learners. They tried to facilitate them in becoming the masters of the learning process. Having witnessed their approach in teaching and the success of the school in every aspect, we came to believe that it is an effective teaching approach in Dunman. It is effective because it arouses students' interest in learning and the involvement of the students gives them ownership and commitment in their learning. We think most teachers know about the theory of this kind of teaching approach, though they may not have the confidence to put it in practice.

In Hong Kong, teachers care as much to search for effective teaching approach. They are also under the pressure to search for ways and means to ensure students are learning and the examination results are improving. However, the concerns of teachers in Hong Kong are a general lack of time and students' lack of initiative to work hard. In most cases, teachers need to cover as much as possible in the limited timeframe. They find that students do not work hard unless they have tests or examinations. Teachers try to cover everything in the syllabus and administer more tests to press their students to work harder. Teachers always feel that the more pressure they give, the more carefree the students are. It is quite common to see that teachers are frustrated by the performance of the students. If they go to Dunman, they may be able to find that there are alternatives in teaching approach. Teachers in Dunman are not only doing a good job but they have proven that their approach works for them. Their success is rooted in their belief and aspiration. Their mastery of the knowledge, skills and attitude in using this teaching approach is important. In particular, their personal mastery of the learning theory is a prerequisite for using this approach in classroom practice. We believe this has to do with the school policy on providing teachers with adequate opportunities for professional development. Teachers are the key persons that make the learning activities in Dunman classrooms successful. Only the teachers can make students the owners of their learning. Of course, parents' support is essential because students are engaged in a different mode of learning. Parents need to have a clear idea of what kind of education their children are going to receive so as to avoid any possible misunderstanding. We therefore came to understand why 'Daring' to experiment had to be added into the 5 'D's and why participation of parents was necessary.

Staff Appraisal

Teachers in Singapore are awarded with performance bonus if they are found to have good performance in the whole year assessment. There are two kinds of teacher assessments. In May, the potential of every teacher is assessed and the result is used for the consideration of deployment or promotion. In September, performance of every teacher is assessed and the result is used to determine whether performance bonus should be given to the teacher or not. A teacher whose performance is assessed grade A to C is awarded a performance bonus equivalent to half or one-third of his monthly salary. Assessing potential and performance of teachers separately is a better method than assessing both items together. A teacher with good performance is worth giving some kind of award, but might not be awarded a promotion or senior post unless he has proved to have the right quality and potential. In Hong Kong, a teacher with very good performance in teaching is usually promoted to senior posts as an award. In the senior post, the teacher is required to be less

involved in teaching and more in administrative duties. In many cases, teachers who are good at teaching may not be good leaders. Therefore, promotion simply based on good performance does not seem to be desirable. The teacher assessment in Singapore seems to be a better system than that in Hong Kong.

Recognition & Award

There is no doubt that impressive examination results is seen as the first most important aim of schools in Singapore. Schools are ranked according to their performance in public examination. The top 50 schools are publicised in a form of league table to ensure that the public learns about the top schools. This is a strategy to ensure these schools continue to get better intakes. This kind of strategy may lead to polarisation of schools into two extremes, but more and more countries are trying to adopt this strategy to drive their schools to excel.

Staff Development

In Singapore, individual teachers are given national awards and bonus for good performance. They are also given both recognition and awards internally by the schools. Certainly, recognition and awards help to motivate teachers to work for the goals set by the government and the school. This strategy will be successful only if teachers perceive that the assessment of their performance is done in a fair manner. Yet, this strategy may fail to motivate teachers who do not foresee that they have a chance to win. Therefore, staff development is another important strategy for Singapore schools to ensure that their teachers are doing a good job. If the performance of a teacher is assessed to be not good enough, he will be required to take a training course. In Singapore, teachers assessed with low grades (grade D to E) are given no bonus and are required to participate in staff training and special programmes. Furthermore, staff development is emphasized in every Singaporean school. Some schools such as Dunman have more emphasis on professional development than other schools. All these suggest that the schools and the teachers are motivated through recognition and award without ignoring staff development.

Singaporean Government

One key factor that could lead to the success of the Singaporean schools is the leadership of the Singaporean government. There is no question that the leadership of the Singaporean Government is very strong. A common vision of the whole country, “ Learning Nation and Thinking Schools”, carries considerable weight. Learning is an aspiration of the whole country and thinking is the focus that should be emphasised in schools. As learning is advocated in the nation, improvement in quality of education is more likely to bear fruits than societies that only advocate economic success. The government determination of making significant improvement to the quality of education is evidenced in the schools that were visited. There is no doubt that schools are submissive to the common vision of the nation. Because school curricula and school finance are centrally controlled, Singaporean schools have little flexibility unless they acquire an autonomous school status. Government policy on education plays a leading role in directing schools to the way they should be run. Highly centralised power and authority on education has a practical reason. The preservation of racial and religious harmony is the most important mission in Singapore education system. The government needs to respect individual cultures within its pluralistic society. Although mother-tongue teaching remains a

subject in school, English language is taken as the first. Such a language policy ensures that English is a commonly used language for communication between different ethnic groups. It is very important to unite a nation with races speaking in completely different languages and having different beliefs. It has another benefit in that students who are proficient in English are more competitive in the human resource market of the world. Nevertheless, strong leadership at the central would sometimes avoid chaotic situation in education system. The emphasis of nation formation and national education also consolidates the loyalty to the nation of Singapore which calls for commitment of the citizens to their country.

Reflection

Today, schools in Hong Kong are facing more challenges. The challenge is not only competition among local schools but also the competitiveness of Hong Kong. An article in Ming Pao Daily on 6th April, 2001 reported on the study of Secondary two students' ability in Maths and Science. It had been carried out by an international organisation at Boston recently. It was found that Hong Kong came fourth in Maths achievement while Singapore came first. The Dean of the School of Education HKU Professor K. S. Leung warned that if we do not reform our traditional approach in teaching, we are going to be ranked lower than the tenth. In Science achievement, Hong Kong students were ranked at 15th while Singapore came after Taiwan as the second. It simply suggests that Hong Kong has no room for complacency. There is a need for us to reflect on our education system. If assessment of student ability in English language is made among these countries, Hong Kong would certainly be ranked far behind Singapore and other English speaking countries. If we want to survive in the world of competition, there is a desperate need for us to reform our teaching approach. Our visit to Singapore strongly suggests that there should not be any further delay and we have a lot to learn from them.

Conclusion

The schools that we visited are very successful in the sense that they outperform others in the public examination or achieve remarkable improvement. Yet, they provide a well-rounded education to the students. These schools are also very successful in other aspects such as physical fitness, uniform groups, IT projects and cultural activities, etc. Unquestionably, it must be attributed to the great effort of the staff and the pupils who are under the effective leadership of the schools. The recognition and award system of Singapore might help to perpetuate the success of these schools. Acquiring the autonomous status, the schools are awarded with extra resource for improvement. However, this is not a determining factor in the success of the schools. If this can encourage the teachers in these schools, it certainly would work for the teachers in other schools. There must be something more basic. In these schools, they not only have clear and purposeful statements such as vision and mission, but also a determination to see their dreams come true. These schools have shown to us they dare to experiment with innovative and creative ideas. In the Anglican High School, their vision is to see that their students become community leaders and political leaders. All of their students are given enhancement programmes to learn how to speak in public at an early age. In the Dunman Secondary School, students are expected to pursue personal mastery and therefore the approach to teaching is changed significantly from the traditional approach. In the Manjusri Secondary School, students are expected to become responsible life-long learners. The setting up of a Champion corner for "at-risk" students is remarkably daring and innovative. In the Serangoon Secondary School, students are expected to become life-long learners committed to the nation. Reading period is created to foster a reading habit amongst students. All these initiatives exhibit the

determination of these schools to work towards their vision. The schools are run under effective leadership of the schools. The common characteristic of these schools is the persistence and effort they have put in the implementation of their improvement initiatives for the realization of their missions and visions. The ownership and commitment of an effective staff especially the middle management are the important factors. These are not induced by recognition and awards. The prevailing culture of the schools and the professionalism of the staff determine why these schools outperform others.