

## Language Curriculum Development: Moving with the Times

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**Abstract:** Curriculum development has to move in tandem and in a practical way with the ever changing societal needs and global trends in order to stay relevant and competitive at all times. This paper shows that curriculum development could occur at three levels of implementation and that it is at the school level that changes to the curriculum are most profound.

With the continuing interest and debate on a thinking curriculum, since 1997, “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” has been the buzzword for educational institutions in Singapore. Implicit in a national document of the same title are a number of poignant educational messages which are now being translated into national initiatives and realized in stages in the Singapore school curriculum. This visionary document looks many years ahead into the future for how educational institutions, as thinking schools for transforming the country into a learning nation, can remain relevant and are able to keep pace with, if not ahead of, current trends and competition.

This paper examines the various educational initiatives that have been incorporated in the school curriculum in Singapore today and how the schools are coping with the rapidly changing educational landscape. Elsewhere, it has also been widely acknowledged that “the ability to *learn*, to reason, to *think* creatively, to make decisions, and to solve problems” should be an educational norm (Moss, undated, cited in Henson, 2001:345; highlighting, my own).

Schools are beginning to realize that education is more than just being taught academic subjects; it is also a preparation for life, for sustained learning beyond school. The challenge for Singapore schools is how well we understand by “*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*”, and for many it is certainly more than just another educational slogan. It is necessary for us to take constant stock of education and ensure continuous progress.

**Keywords:** levels of development, thinking schools, learning nation, flexibility, excellence.

### What is meant by “curriculum”?

The term “curriculum”, which originally in Latin meant “racecourse”, today denotes different significations to different people and various understandings have appeared in the literature to refer it to a range of concepts, processes and practices from *content* to *a sequence of courses*, from *a program of studies* to *a set of performance objectives*, from *a set of materials* to *learner experiences*, and – more broadly – to “*everything that is planned by school personnel.*” (Marsh & Morris, 1991:5; Henson, 2001:10). Rather than be alarmed by the variety of definitions of curriculum that have surfaced, we should be in fact be professionally gratified that an awareness of such a multi-dimensional notion of the subject will help us appreciate better why curriculum development is indeed “a complex process” (Graves, 1996:12). As rightly noted by Ornstein & Hunkins (1998): “The plethora of definitions demonstrates a dynamism of varied voices in the field. These voices introduce diverse interpretations by drawing on specific modes of thought, particular ideologies, diverse pedagogies, unique political experiences, and various cultural experiences.” The deeper implication of this multi-faceted understanding of curriculum is that because of its

diverse sources of interpretation, an effective school curriculum is truly a preparation for life, viz. the development of the intellect, personal mastery, political sensitivity and cultural awareness. Henson (2001:31) similarly observes that, “whatever the definition, educators agree that if it is to be worthwhile, the curriculum must be more than a document that it is prepared, filed and ignored. An awareness of the different definitions enhances the curriculum planner’s ability to plan, execute, evaluate and improve curricula. Furthermore, a sound, comprehensive understanding of curriculum is needed today to guard against the narrow view of some reformers who may aspire to use the curriculum to achieve their narrow goals.” In curriculum design, concepts and processes such as learner needs, goals and objectives, content, selection and organization of teaching-learning materials and programme evaluation are chief among the curriculum components taken into account during planning (See, e.g. Graves, 1996:13; Richards, 2001:1-2).

### **Thinking Schools, Learning Nation**

In the Singapore context and indeed elsewhere, curriculum planning is as much a political and social concern as it is an educational one for it is a truism that “to remain effective, the curriculum must be designed and modified to reflect the changes in society at large, changes in the local community, changes in the local school, and changes in the students.” (Henson, 2001:14). Many political pronouncements with reference to education will have a direct impact on curriculum development and education reform. In a seminal paper, “*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*”, commonly verbalized in the local educational scene simply as *TSLN*, presented by the then Singapore Prime Minister, Mr. Goh Chok Tong, at a thinking conference in 1997 at Suntec City, Singapore, many of the societal aspirations for the country are concerned with ensuring that educational practices in Singapore stay relevant with rapidly changing times. An excerpt of the Prime Minister’s opening lines in that paper set the stage for economic change and, with it, education reform as well:

“A nation’s wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will depend on the capacity of its people to learn. Their imagination, their ability to seek out new technologies and ideas and to apply them in everything they do will be the key source of economic growth. Their collective capacity to learn will determine the well-being of a nation.

We know three things about the future. First, it will be an intensely global future, with diminishing barriers to flow of goods, services and information....Second, knowledge and innovation will be absolutely critical....The third defining feature of the future is that it will be one of change, and increasingly rapid change....Education and training are central to how nations will fare in this future...”

(Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1997, speaking at the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on thinking, Suntec City, Singapore.)

What this means is that education in Singapore must produce a nation that is capable of learning on its own well after formal schooling for every student. To do this, Singapore needs to have thinking schools to ensure a learning nation that can keep pace with global changes in order to survive and thrive. In many respects, *TSLN* (1997) is a forward-looking document for guiding much of curriculum development and education reform in Singapore even to this day. Many of the political pronouncements in that document have since been interpreted in terms of educational maxims or thrusts which drive curriculum development and form the bases of many national initiatives for education reform from time to time. In Singapore,

education reforms are not necessarily always intended to correct existing flaws in the school curriculum but to address some economic, social and educational needs to keep pace with or be ahead of the times. Such education reforms, often periodic, are frequently parceled out in manageable small doses and are carried out at the school level. After the 1997 conference, the first major curriculum change at the *national level* occurred in 2001.

### **Levels of curriculum development**

In Singapore, curriculum development can be observed to operate at three levels namely, national, school and classroom. It should be pointed out that the concept of “development” in “curriculum development” here is taken to imply any change or revision of programme and, therefore, it may not always be construed as a process of producing a new curriculum document from scratch each time. Likewise, broadly speaking, the term “curriculum” in the same phrase can be a curriculum, a programme, or a course.

At the *national level*, a curriculum change affecting all levels of education from primary to secondary normally occurs once every ten years to tie in with the ten-year cycle of schooling from primary education (i.e. six years from Primary 1 to Primary 6) through secondary education (i.e. four years from Secondary 1 to Secondary 4). Thus, between the time of its introduction – and, along with it, the gradual phasing in of the syllabus by grade-level each year – and the time of its completion, a nationally implemented syllabus will have taken ten years to reach its full term. During this ten-year period, a number of significantly relevant education reforms may also occur to keep the curriculum relevant. These periodic reforms may be motivated by some national educational initiatives, frequently issuing from the Ministry of Education (MOE) or from some political promptings such as the timely call for “Teach Less, Learn More” at a recent National Day Rally. Since 1998, MOE-initiated work plan seminars have been held annually for all primary and secondary schools and junior colleges to re-visit national curricula and collectively discuss action plans to keep education for the nation in synchrony with the rapidly pace of change both locally and globally, and in pursuance of “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”. In consequence, some form of education reform at the *school level* may occur every year when individual schools in Singapore would, at their strategic planning meetings, translate and incorporate some of the national educational initiatives and – against the backdrop of their own school philosophy, mission, goals and objectives – review and, if necessary, revise parts of the school instructional programmes to keep abreast of the times. Changes to the school curriculum at the school level are usually responses to national initiatives set in train by the Ministry of Education at the annual work plan seminars with educational institutions. As schools have their own vision, mission, goals and objectives, they are encouraged to work out their own curricular and co-curricular programmes.

When we speak of curriculum change at the *classroom level*, we mean that teachers, with their given school curriculum or subject syllabus will teach their subject area after their own fashion and beliefs. This may incur changing or adjusting instructional methodology to suit the needs of different learners. In this sense, curriculum change at the classroom level happens all the time.

What is generally the case then is that while a major curriculum change may take place at the national level once every ten years, individual schools interpret the national subject syllabuses in their own way and may discuss changes or revisions to their school curriculum or subject syllabuses each time during their yearly strategic meetings. Once the revised

curriculum is taken on board for use for at least another year, different teachers in the school teaching their own subject, are likely to make informed changes to the instructional programme to meet the needs of their own students. This is healthy change, if done professionally.

What is perhaps remarkable about this three-level curriculum process is that while Singapore schools are attempting to keep in step with the exalted theme of each year's work plan seminar, they are also given the autonomy and flexibility to decide how the theme can best be transformed into viable instructional programs to realize the national educational goals as well as the aspirations of individual schools. As if echoing the curriculum maxims expressed by Richards (2001), in these schools we find that "in developing goals for educational programs, curriculum planners draw on their understanding both of the present and long-term needs of learners and of society as well as the planners' beliefs and ideologies about schools, learners and teachers" (2001:113). As the interests of the main curriculum stakeholders are carefully weighed, in defining viable educational programmes for the year, changes to the curriculum made at the school level are thus most profound. There is a strong sense of ownership of the curriculum as it is the school that decides what is best for itself.

### **Towards excellence in education**

Attendant on curriculum change at the school level is the natural propulsion of Singapore schools into a healthy competition with each other for educational and organizational excellence by developing and instituting meaningful and sustained curricula that would be recognized nationally as effective practices which eventually win them special awards. In the most recent MOE work plan seminar held on 28 September 2006 in Singapore, all the principals of schools and invited participants from related educational bodies (such as the National Institute of Education, the local universities and the polytechnics) were brought together to celebrate the successes and promises of schools which won special awards, such as the School Excellence Award, the School Distinction Award, the Best Practice Award, the Sustained Achievement Award, and the Outstanding Development Award.

*The School Excellence Award* is for "schools that have put in effective systems and excellent processes with clear deliverables in mind. These schools have sustained achievements in a wide spectrum of pupil development processes." (Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar, 2006) By far, this is the highest Award given to a few select schools for exemplary demonstration of excellence in education. What is most interesting about these Awards is that they are not given just for academic excellence alone but also for other fields of contributions to education such as sustained achievements in non-academic areas like organizational effectiveness, extra-curricular activities, all-round development of students, and well-being of the teaching staff and students.

### **A Learning Nation: Moving with the times**

In many ways, achievement awards are given to schools that not only produce excellence in different fields of educational endeavours but also demonstrate the tenacity and resourcefulness to respond effectively to changing learner and society needs cued by the various national educational initiatives, which themselves are, to a large extent, amplifications of the *TSLN* ideals. Scherer (2006:7) in an article to *Educational Leadership* (May 2006, Vol. 63 No. 8) exhorts educators to take up the challenge to change, saying that "the call to change is a call to learn, and surely that is a call that educators are listening for." In 1997, Singapore listened and learned to quickly pick up the signal for educational change.

In the document, “*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*” and subsumed under the sub-heading “Education for the Future” were many poignant educational messages detailing what Singapore schools must do to survive into the future as a learning nation. In a nutshell, they need to relentlessly develop thinking schools where “our young can think for themselves so that the next generation can find their own solutions to whatever new problems they may face. Singapore’s vision for meeting this challenge for the future is encapsulated in four words: THINKING SCHOOLS, LEARNING NATION. It is a vision for a total learning environment...” (Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore, 1997).

Table 1 below shows some of the more salient points about “thinking schools” and “learning nation” extracted from the *TSLN* document:

Table 1: *Quotes from “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (Singapore’s PM, 1997)*

<i>Thinking Schools</i>	<i>Learning Nation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “a fundamental review of its curriculum and assessment system to see how we can better develop the <b>creative thinking skills and learning skills</b> required for the future”</li> <li>• “to cut back on the <b>amount of content knowledge</b> that students are required to learn”</li> <li>• “to encourage teachers and students to spend more time on <b>projects</b> that can help develop these skills”</li> <li>• “will use <b>IT</b> widely to develop communication skills and habits of independent learning”</li> <li>• “will ensure our students retain mastery over the <b>core knowledge and concepts</b> that give them the basis for further learning”</li> <li>• “to <b>stretch all our pupils</b> and keep them striving for <b>excellence</b>”</li> <li>• “fire in our students a <b>passion</b> for learning, instead of studying for the sake of getting good grades in their examinations”</li> <li>• “have the desire and aptitude to continue <b>discovering new knowledge</b> well after they leave school”</li> <li>• “thinking schools must be the crucibles for <b>questioning and searching</b>, within and outside the classroom”</li> <li>• “thinking schools will also redefine the <b>role of teachers</b>. Every school must be a model <b>learning organization</b>”</li> <li>• “teachers must be given time to <b>reflect</b>, learn and keep <b>up-to-date</b>”</li> <li>• “to make the textbooks and the <b>Internet</b> relevant to their students, <b>relating what is learnt</b> to current events and issues”</li> <li>• “more <b>autonomy</b> to schools, so that teachers and principals can <b>devise their own solutions</b> to problems”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “will make Singapore a <b>LEARNING NATION</b>, that goes <b>beyond schools</b> and educational institutions”</li> <li>• “learning goes beyond simply <b>maximizing an individual's potential</b>.”</li> <li>• “to invest in <b>learning as a continuous activity</b>... We must make <b>learning a national culture</b>”</li> <li>• “<b>LEARNING NATION</b> begins by recognizing that <b>education is a continuum</b>, starting with the early pre-school years and continuing throughout life</li> <li>• “to train parents to provide their children with <b>rich experiences</b> to help them develop during their initial pre-school years... make <b>quality pre-school learning</b> widely available”</li> <li>• “<b>LEARNING NATION</b> will require <b>innovation</b> at every level of society”</li> <li>• “to recognize that every individual, regardless of status, has a <b>contribution</b> to make to improving the organization”</li> <li>• “the <b>development of human resources</b> at the centre of management philosophy”</li> <li>• “<b>'educational outreach' activities</b> - taking students from schools and giving them <b>hands-on experiences</b> and exposing them to <b>real world technologies</b>”</li> <li>• encourage every individual to engage in learning as a matter of necessity... to keep <b>upgrading his skills and knowledge</b></li> <li>• “to bring about a spirit of innovation, of learning by doing, of everyone <b>each at his own level</b> all the time asking how he can do his job better”</li> <li>• “to enable Singapore to <b>compete</b> and <b>stay ahead</b>”</li> </ul>

In a nutshell, to embrace the spirit of *TSLN*, Singapore schools must work on a school curriculum that produces creative and critical thinkers who are able to solve problems, continue learning on their own throughout life, confront real world issues and innovate to stay ahead of competition.

Transforming these *TSLN* aspirations into appropriate themes for annual work plan seminars has been one of the staple means for unpacking the *TSLN* philosophy into smaller chunks of digestible educational motifs that will constantly challenge the schools to implement workable systems, processes and instructional programmes to take them safely into the future. Defining the purpose of the inaugural Work Plan Seminar in 1998, the Ministry of Education announced that “it is the first of what will be an annual seminar in the continuous effort by the Ministry to prepare our education system to meet future challenges.” (Ministry of Education, Work Plan Seminar, 1998). To date, nine such work plan seminars have been conducted. With each seminar, the schools are again set in motion to pave the way for some change and to ensure that they are on the right track and to learn from one another.

Table 2 below shows the development of themes arising from the *TSLN* document and how these themes relate to and amplify or reinforce the precepts and guiding principles of “*Learning Nation*”.

It is evident from Table 2 that the national initiatives in the form of themes at annual work plan seminars provide the stimuli for schools to re-examine the core concepts embodied in *TSLN*. These initiatives complement each other with the primary function of an initiative building upon the previous one and reinforcing it. In almost all cases, each theme generates discussion of on-going education reform that will result in schools putting in place instructional programmes and co-curricular activities that consolidate all of the precepts and principles (LN1-LN12) of a Learning Nation.

In a sense, schools need to be Thinking Schools which will develop leaders in education and organizational processes and which will also produce students who will benefit from education to emerge as individuals empowered to compete confidently in a rapidly changing and uncertain future. The pervasive message in *TSLN* says it all: “The task of education must therefore be to provide the young with the core knowledge and core skills and the habits of learning that enable them to learn continuously throughout their lives. We have to equip them for a future that we cannot really predict.” (Goh Chok Tong, *ibid*, 1997).

The precepts and principles of *Learning Nation*, as shown above, are couched in general terms to give schools more leeway for innovation and experimentation.

Many educational programmes are up and running in the schools. The two master plans for Information Technology – IT Masterplan 1 (1997-2001) and IT Masterplan 2 (2002-2006) – are living illustrations of the effort put in by the Ministry of Education working in concert with the schools to ensure that schools have computer labs with ample computers for all the students and teachers, and with the teachers teaching IT-based lessons for at least 30% of the curriculum time.

Thinking skills and problem-based learning form the basis of many classroom discussions which often centre on topical or controversial local and global issues. Most students are

computer-literate and are able to use web-based resources for independent and cooperative project work.

Students are spotted and recognized for exhibition of personal talents in both academic and non-academic pursuits, and school programmes are customized to suit the needs of students. For example, the Gifted Education programme, the Art and Music Elective Programme, and programmes to help weaker students either at the school or class level are in place to address the different needs of students.

Stakeholders in education like educators, parents, teachers and the general public have all some say in how school programmes may be run. School admission is based on merit but admission criteria have been improved to take account of factors other than examination results.

Table 2: *Development of Work Plan Seminar Themes for “Thinking Schools” and a “Learning Nation”*

<i>Work Plan Seminar Themes</i>	<i>Learning Nation (LN)</i>
<p><b>“Developing Thinking Schools” (1998)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Developing creative &amp; critical thinking skills &amp; problem-solving skills, and changing mind-sets                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN1-LN12</b></p>	<p><b>LN1:</b> “will make Singapore a LEARNING NATION, that goes <b>beyond schools</b> and educational institutions”</p>
<p><b>“Ability-driven Education” (1999)</b>  <b>“ADE – Putting the System in Place” (2000)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Mass customization and development of processes and abilities                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN2-LN4, LN6-LN12.</b></p>	<p><b>LN2:</b> “learning goes beyond simply <b>maximizing an individual's potential.</b></p> <p><b>LN3:</b> “to invest in <b>learning as a continuous activity...We must make learning a national culture</b>”</p>
<p><b>“Scan, Envision, Energize, Deploy” (2001)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Scan the educational landscape to envision the future, energize and deploy resources                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN1-LN12</b></p>	<p><b>LN4:</b> “LEARNING NATION begins by recognizing that <b>education is a continuum</b>, starting with the early pre-school years and continuing throughout life</p>
<p><b>“One Purpose, Many Ways” (2002)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Stakeholders having common goals, and greater autonomy for schools                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN1-LN12</b></p>	<p><b>LN5:</b> “to train parents to provide their children with <b>rich experiences</b> to help them develop during their initial pre-school years....make <b>quality pre-school learning</b> widely available”</p>
<p><b>“Blue Sky” (2003)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Develop all-round education, sound national &amp; corporate values, anticipate the possibilities of a globalized world, innovate to compete.                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN1-12</b></p>	<p><b>LN6:</b> “LEARNING NATION will require <b>innovation</b> at every level of society”</p> <p><b>LN7:</b> “to recognize that every individual, regardless of status, has a <b>contribution</b> to make to improving the organization”</p>
<p><b>“Enabling Teachers, Nurturing Students” (2004)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Building teachers’ capabilities as teaching professionals, and motivating and nurturing students’ young inquiring minds.                      LN Precepts/Principles: <b>LN1-LN12</b></p>	<p><b>LN8:</b> “the <b>development of human resources</b> at the centre of management philosophy”</p>
<p><b>“Touching Hearts, Engaging Minds” (2005)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Teach less, learn more - to teach better, to engage our students and prepare them for</p>	<p><b>LN9:</b> “ <b>'educational outreach' activities</b> - taking students from schools and giving them <b>hands-on experiences</b> and exposing them to <b>real world technologies</b>”</p>

<p>life, rather than to teach for tests and examinations. Richer interaction between teacher and student - about touching hearts and engaging minds  <u>LN Precepts/Principles: LN1-LN12</u></p> <p><b>“Excellence for All, Together our Future” (2006)</b>  <u>Main Thrust:</u> Many peaks of excellence – nurturing every talent and maximizing the potential in every child; leveling up opportunities for all through education  <u>LN Precepts/Principles: LN1-LN12</u></p>	<p><b>LN10:</b> encourage every individual to engage in learning as a matter of necessity...to keep <b>upgrading his skills and knowledge</b></p> <p><b>LN11:</b> “to bring about a spirit of innovation, of learning by doing, of everyone <b>each at his own level</b> all the time asking how he can do his job better”</p> <p><b>LN12:</b> “to enable Singapore to <b>compete and stay ahead</b>”</p>
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Education is more than just improving the intellect and the acquisition of book knowledge. It is also preparing students to understand societal issues. The National Education programme instills the right values and attitudes to life and to other people, and community involvement projects take students beyond the classroom to experience the real world. A balanced, holistic education is the norm.

With careful subject content reduction, teachers are gearing up to teach less so that students learn more. It is a way of empowering learners with teachers as facilitators and guides. Schools are given greater autonomy and flexibility to decide how schools may be organized and run that will bring out the best in the learning environment and in the learners. It is also about touching hearts and engaging inquiring minds.

School programmes hinge on innovation and enterprise. In a very recent newspaper report, it was announced by the new Minister of State for Education, Mr. Lui Tuck Yew, that the spirit of innovation and enterprise was “well and alive in schools” and that since 2000, \$17 million have been pledged to empower principals and teachers in expanding ground-up innovative initiatives in their schools.

The overall goal of education is provide education for all, to recognize and develop the many peaks of excellence in students and to level up opportunities for all so that no student is left behind.

This is but a general sweep of the changing educational landscape in Singapore schools. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell on specific programmes of schools which are too many to do justice to.

In conclusion, *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN)* is perhaps both an enigma and a challenge to schools and, ironically, it is the enigma that makes it more challenging for Singapore schools to decide how they need to equip their students for the unpredictable future. Up till this point in time, it has been so far so good for all.

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