

Education in Singapore : Preparation for School Leadership

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Introduction

In this paper, I would first give a brief write-up on the education system in Singapore. I will then elaborate on career advancement of education officers in the Singapore's education system, and will then focus on the leadership track of the career advancement and in particular the preparation for school leadership.

Brief on Singapore Education System

The mission of the Ministry of Education (MOE) is to mould the future of our nation, by moulding the people who will determine the future of the nation. The vision for meeting the challenges for the future can be summed up as Thinking Schools, Learning Nation - a vision which will ensure that Singapore will be a nation of thinking and committed citizens who are capable of contributing towards Singapore's continued growth and prosperity.

Singapore's education system is flexible and caters to every child's abilities, interests and aptitudes so as to help each develop to his fullest potential. It focuses on the development of human resources to meet Singapore's need for an educated and skilled workforce. It also facilitates the inculcation of sound moral values to serve as cultural ballast in the face of rapid progress and change.

The education system emphasises literacy, numeracy, bilingualism, physical education, civics and moral education, and creative and independent thinking. The bilingual policy requires each child to learn English and his Mother Tongue. This enables children to be proficient in English, which is the language of commerce, technology and administration, and their Mother Tongue, the language of their cultural heritage. Computer-based programmes are also introduced in schools to promote independent learning and enhance higher order thinking skills in pupils.

With an annual budget of about S\$6.5 billion, MOE employs about 27,000 teachers in schools and provides education for about 520,000 students in 355 schools (174 primary schools, 160 secondary schools, 3 full schools and 18 junior colleges/centralised institute) and about 119,000 students in 9 post-secondary educational institutes.

A child in Singapore undergoes at least 10 years of general education. This comprises

- 6 years of primary education, which is compulsory with effect from 1 January 2003, and
- 4 years of secondary education.

The school year consists of 4 terms of 10 weeks each, beginning 2 January. There is a 1-week vacation between the first and second terms and another between the third and fourth terms. There is a 4-week break in the middle of the year and a long vacation of 6 weeks at the end of the year.

To cater to the varied talents and aptitudes of students, there are different routes in the secondary/post secondary education landscape that students can take.

National examinations are conducted at the following levels:

- Grade 6 which is Primary School Leaving Examinations for placement into Grade 7 (Secondary 1)
- Grade 10 or Secondary 4 which is the Cambridge General Certificate in Education (GCE) Ordinary Level or Normal Level examination for placement into post secondary education
- Grade 12 or Junior College Year 2 which is the Cambridge GCE Advanced Level examination for placement into the universities.

The Schools Division within the MOE Headquarters (HQ) with its 4 Zonal Branches based at the headquarters of the MOE oversees the management of all primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes. Schools are grouped into clusters and each cluster is facilitated by a Cluster Superintendent. The Cluster Superintendents in each Zonal Branch develop, guide and supervise the school leadership teams to ensure that schools are effectively run. They ensure that there is networking, sharing and collaboration among the member schools within the cluster so as to raise the capacity of the leadership teams and the level of performance in each school. Cluster Superintendents also play a key role in personnel and financial management. They develop personnel in their clusters according to training needs and identify personnel with potential for career development. They ensure the effective and optimal use of cluster financial resources such as funding worthwhile school projects and activities that help schools to achieve the Desired Outcomes of Education.

Career Development for Education Officers

The Singapore Education Service seeks to provide a challenging and enriching career with different career fields of excellence that cater to the different talents, abilities and aspirations of the education officers. The 3 career tracks are:

- Teaching Track;
- Leadership Track; and
- Senior Specialist Track.

These three tracks will enable MOE to build a top-notch team of professional teachers, capable leaders and dedicated specialists.



Teaching Track

The Teaching Track caters to the majority of Education Officers. It provides professional development and advancement opportunities for teachers who make teaching excellence in the classroom the primary focus in their careers. In general, all education officers start their career in the Education Service on the Teaching Track, i.e. as classroom teachers. After graduating from the National

Institute of Education which is the sole teacher training institution in Singapore, the officers will be posted to a school that requires their area of expertise.

Leadership Track

The Leadership Track is the track for leadership positions in the schools and MOE Headquarters (HQ) and is the track leading to the apex job in the Education Service, the Director-General of Education position. Teachers who have demonstrated their ability to take on leadership responsibilities can look forward to positions such as Subject Head/ Level Head, Heads of Department, Vice-Principal and Principal. They may also be posted to MOE HQ to take on leadership positions.

Senior Specialist Track

The Senior Specialist Track aims to develop a strong core of officers at MOE HQ with deep knowledge and skills in specific areas in Education. The 4 specialist clusters are:

a. Curriculum & Instructional Design:

Expertise may be anchored in curricular and instructional design subjects (languages, mathematics, humanities, etc), co-curricular activities (sports, etc), different student levels (pre-school, etc) or other niche areas in the relevant field (IT in teaching & learning, reading & literacy).

b. Educational Psychology and Guidance:

Offers specialisation in the provision of psychological and guidance support, and advice to students of varied abilities and ages catering to different learning, emotional and social needs. Expertise may be anchored in specific student learning stages (pre-school, young children, etc), unique needs of students, and specific educational, psychological and guidance approaches or other niche areas in the relevant field.

c. Educational Testing and Measurement;

Offers specialisation in the design, development and evaluation of tests and assessments. Expertise may be anchored in different assessment modes and methodologies, psychometrics and measurement, or other niche areas in the relevant field.

d. Educational Research and Statistics.

Offers specialisation in the area of research and statistics to support development and evaluation of education policies and programmes. Expertise

may be anchored in specific research approaches and methodologies, or other niche areas in the relevant field.

Preparation for School Leadership

In Singapore, the MOE has direct control over the schools in terms of the overarching mission and vision, the curriculum and personnel functions. Embedded within this highly structured organisation is a carefully conceived staff development programme that addresses the career aspirations of teachers. The Leadership Track provides opportunities for education officers who aspire to lead, develop, inspire and draw out the very best in individuals and teams working together towards providing high quality education. Talents are being identified actively at schools to take on leadership roles. For those who have been assessed as having the capacity for greater tasks and who wish to take on higher office within the school system, the normal career path requires them to take on administrative duties in addition to their teaching loads. These teachers can be appointed initially as subject heads or heads of department, and, if they demonstrate the potential for leadership, they are put to the test as vice-principals before being considered for principalship. Along the way, potential candidates have to attend interviews at MOE HQ, chaired by the senior management of the MOE (like Director-General of Education) for assessment for suitability for school leadership.

Since 2001, all potential candidates for school principalship have to undergo a 6 month full time training at the National Institute of Education for the Leadership in Education Programme (LEP).

The programme is a full-time 'state-of-the-art' programme of six months' duration. It is designed for selected education officers and it prepares them for leadership in schools. These selected personnel are experienced and well-qualified educators, with a background of successful experience in both teaching and management.

The National Institute of Education works in partnership with MOE to provide a development platform that prepares educational leaders for the challenges and demands of a fast changing system. Thus, the programme is essentially future-oriented, with an emphasis on leadership capability in a dynamic and complex context.

Through a process of learning in diverse contexts, including the authentic workplace of the school and international locations, the learning platform addresses a range of issues that are seen as critical to the success of future leadership. They include: futuring designing and managing learning school organisations that can sustain a competitive advantage in a fast-changing and turbulent environment; strategic choice and marketing; innovative communication and information technology; designing an integrative and innovative curriculum in

order to achieve excellence in teaching and learning; and building human and intellectual capital.

This programme, in short, seeks to provide the sorts of leaders who will continue to keep Singapore at the cutting edge of knowledge and who will lead their institutions to sustainable success.

On-going Development and Professional Upgrading for Principals

The Schools Division within the MOE HQ oversees the professional development of principals. As Singapore is a fairly centralized system, there is a consistency of expectation, and standardised procedures are in place to help principals in their job. Although every school is unique, the standard operating procedures are the same across all schools, and this enables principals to work within certain parameters.

Customised courses are mounted for incumbent principals to better equip them to be effective leaders in areas like Leadership, Strategic Planning and Administration, Management of Staff, Management of Students and Management of Resources. Milestones courses are also planned for principals. For instance, newly appointed principals are put through a 360 degree feedback programme after one year as a school leader. After 3 years as a principal, there is again another round of 360 degree feedback programme. Overseas learning programmes are also planned for principals, usually for those with at least 4 years experience as principals.

The Sabbatical Scheme for Principals was introduced in Jan 2003 by MOE as part of the continuous improvement and development of principals to ensure that school leaders continually meet new challenges with fresh insight and perspectives. Principals who have served for at least 6 years qualify to apply for a full time paid sabbatical of 2 months. The objectives of the Sabbatical are:

- (a) To provide opportunities for continual learning, renewal and growth;
- (b) To deepen officers' understanding of professional, management and leadership issues;
- (c) To expose officers to leading edge thinking so that they can become catalysts of change in our schools

Conclusion

The preparation for school leadership is taken seriously in the Singapore context as school leaders are key to school improvement. The identification and grooming of potential school leaders are undertaken at various levels (at the school level, cluster level and MOE HQ Level). Prior to headship, all the principals in Singapore would have been in the school system for varying durations, and have assumed roles such as heads of department and vice-principals. In addition, a significant number may have work experience in MOE

HQ. All these exposure and experience, coupled with the formal training in the form of the Leaders in Education Programme and the support from supervisors at MOE HQ, help groom and prepare an education officer for school leadership.

About the author:

Yan-Hock LIM is into his fourth year as principal of Geylang Methodist Secondary School, Singapore. The school in which he is heading now is a co-ed school, Grade 7 to 10. It has a total student enrolment of 1370 and 75 teaching staff.

Education

Certificate in Educational Leadership (Leaders in Education Programme)	National Institute of Education, Singapore (2002)
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Master's in Education	Havard University, US, (Sep 1996- Jun 1997)
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Diploma in Education	National Institute of Education, Singapore (1987)
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B Sc (Honours)	National University of Singapore (Physics), 1986
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Cambridge General Certificate in Education (Advanced Level)	Hwa Chong Junior College
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Cambridge General Certificate in Education (Ordinary Level)	Gan Eng Seng School
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Primary School	Bukit Merah South School
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Working History

15 Dec 2002 to date	Principal, Geylang Methodist Sec School
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1 Dec 1999 to Mar 2002	Vice Principal, Hwa Chong Junior College
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23 Aug 1997 to 30 Nov 1999	Assistant Director/Sciences, Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry Of Education
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2 Jan 1994 to Aug 1997	Specialist Officer (Science), Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry Of Education
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Mar 1993 to Dec 1993	Head of Department (Science), River Valley High School
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Mar 1988 to Mar 1993	Physics Teacher, Hwa Chong Junior College
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