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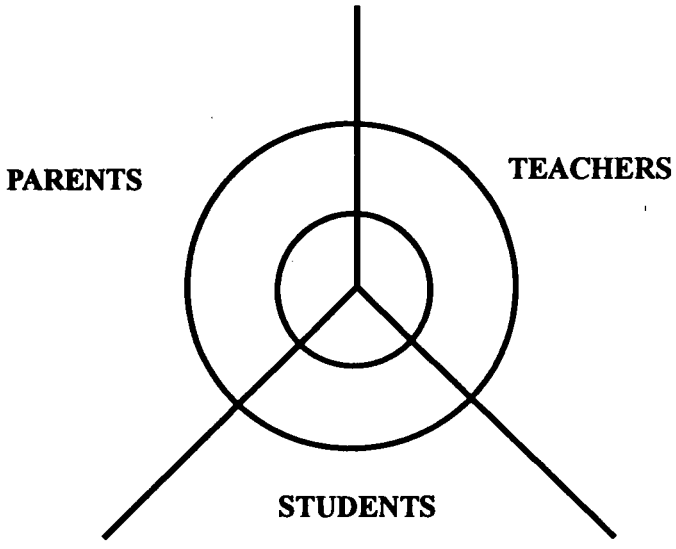
Schools As Learning Centres

Chong Keng Choy

Schools are learning centres. Students come to schools to learn. Teachers expect to learn while they teach. Parents who come to schools for whatever reasons should leave the schools having the positive feeling that they have learned how to help their children. Schools are learning centres to which students, teachers and parents want to return for more learning opportunities. People should have such good experiences with schools that they want to return to schools again and again for more good learning experiences.

Think concentric circles. Look at the innermost circle. This represents your school. Divide this circle into three parts. One part represents learning programmes for students. The second represents those designed for parents. The third represents learning programmes for teachers. The school is a learning centre for students, parents and teachers. You could think of the school as three learning centres, each with a set of learning programmes for parents, students, and teachers respectively. Or, you could think of the school as one learning centre with three sets of learning programmes. These programmes are interrelated because the common purpose of the learning programmes for students, teachers and parents is to help students achieve their greatest potential. Teachers learn to help their students better, and parents learn to help their children better. Such learning programmes for teachers and parents increase the wealth of resources of the school. Teacher and parent quality time could increase the quality of student time on learning tasks. Better quality student time gives students more time for more learning, relaxation, and fun --- that is, better quality student lives.

What kind of learning programmes could principals think about? For students, learning programmes should focus on individualized learning. Information technology should be harnessed to facilitate individual learning needs. Group facilitation is used only when group learning is most appropriate. For example, learning teamwork is best learned in groups, and group facilitation is appropriate. For parents, learning programmes should focus on helping them to support their children's learning. Parental involvement should be pursued as an opportunity for increasing the support resources for student effective learning. For example, well meaning parents could be pressuring their children unnecessarily, and such parents could benefit from learning about approaches that are based on appropriate human development and learning theories. For teachers, learning programmes should focus on their personal growth in skills, knowledge, and attitude. Andragogy should underpin these programmes, predicated on the belief that people become teachers because they want to do something worthwhile with their lives. Andragogy is founded on teachers' tendency toward self-directed learning, their experiences as a rich resource for learning, their learning needs as grounded on their real life tasks and problems in the classroom, and teachers' desire to apply what they have learned immediately. For example, principals could set up infrastructures like funds, facilities and programmes to support self-



directed learning efforts by teachers.

Look at the outer circle. It has three segments too. They represent learning programmes for parents, teachers, and students respectively. Think about these parents of children from other schools. These students and teachers are in other schools too. What could your school do for them? For example, parents with children in your school could bring their neighbours whose children are in other schools to participate in your learning programmes for parents. Teachers in your school could collaborate with teachers of other schools in mounting workshops that could give mutual benefits. Students in your school could participate in learning activities organized jointly by a group of schools. These examples are not new, but one must now think of the deployment of critical resources to such activities that could bring about mutual benefits for participating schools. The main question to ask is "How do these activities help your students achieve their greatest potential?"

You could keep drawing concentric circles that expand outward beyond the outer circle. They could represent parents, teachers, and students in the ASEAN region, in the Asia Pacific region, and in the world. With the proliferation of applications in information technology, borderless schools are in the making. In this future scenario, you could have access to curriculum materials developed in other schools only when you have curriculum materials that other schools want. Otherwise, you could find sufficient money to buy them. Sharing of learning programmes will seem inevitable. Seeking opportunities for increasing your wealth of resources in your school could only be meaningful when mutual benefit is made available. Creative management is necessary for students, teachers and parents to work together for innovative learning programmes. Indeed, students, teachers and parents could work together for developing good curriculum materials. Our school system has been doing very well over the last thirty years by doing more of the same things better and better. I notice that many principals and teachers are now attempting in all sincerity to improve their ways of doing things. That is, they are doing the same things in new ways. It is good to think that there is still room for improvement always. In some of the things schools are doing, more drills and worksheets for example, diminishing returns could be setting it. What students could be getting is more stress, less rest, and greater inefficient use of time and energy. Quality student time and quality teacher time are the two most critical resources for effective learning. Tired students and teachers do not learn very well. In order to level up the performance of schools, principals could look for new things that schools could be doing. Innovation is doing new things. Incorporating quality time of parents into curriculum design and development could be such an innovation. This short article gives a framework to help principals and teachers think about what they could be doing for the continual growth of their schools and in their professional lives.

Do you want to think about a network of learning centres? Could schools collaborate in mutual learning? This could be the subject of a different article. You are welcome to write it. Principals are not doers only. They are also thinkers. *Learning while managing*, as in cycles of trial ... feedback ... reflection, is the way for the principal's professional growth. Doing and thinking make the managing of learning exciting. Principals could become role models for teachers in learning while doing. Teachers could continue to learn while teaching. Think of schools in which teachers ask one another "What have you learn from your class teaching today?" Principals could ask one another "What have you learn from your school managing today?"

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